

Monster Tamer

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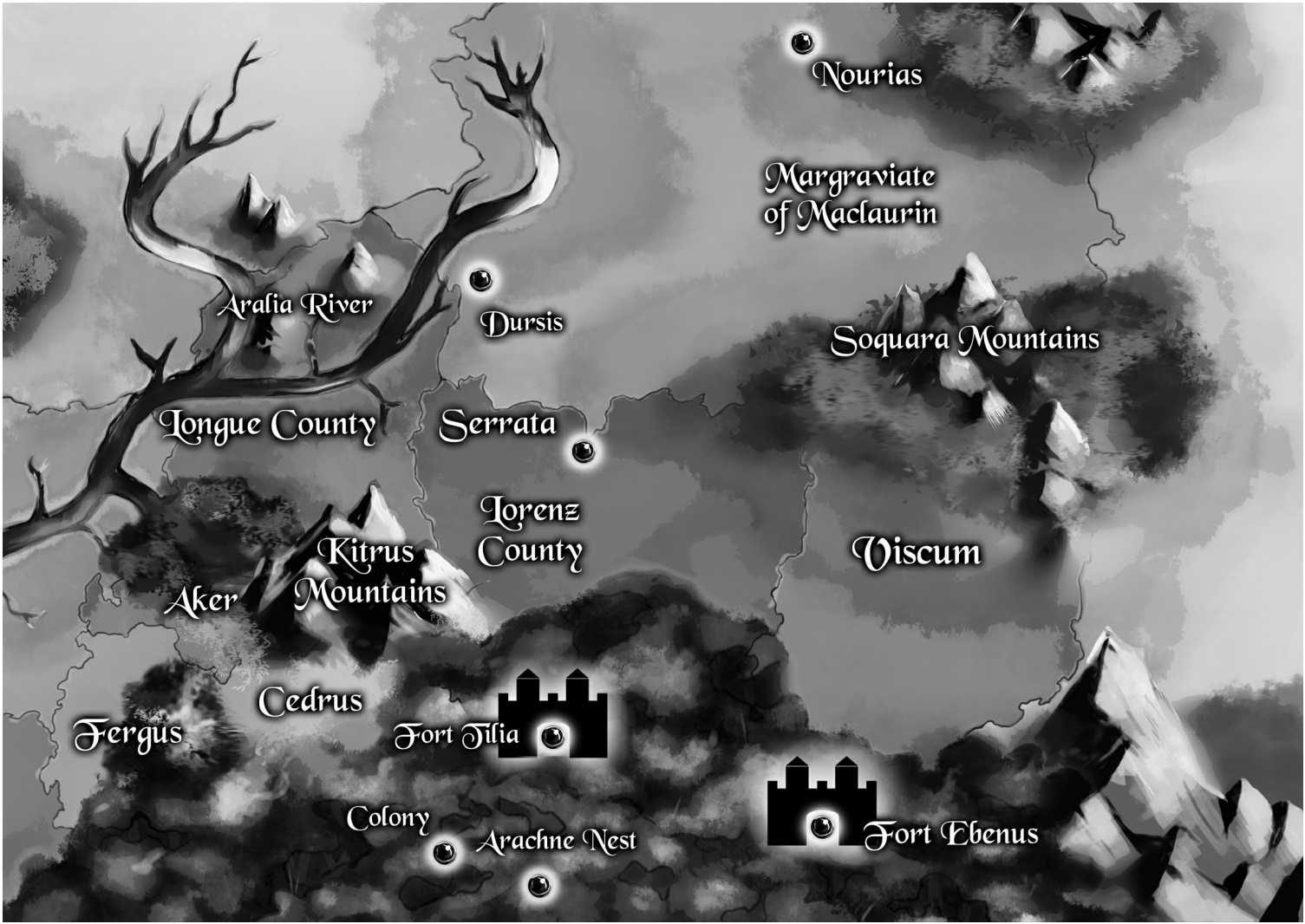


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Chapter 1: Determination Made on a Certain Morning

Come morning, when I opened my eyes, I found a girl smiling right before me. Her white hair was reminiscent of spider threads, and her skin was practically transparent. Nearly everything about her was white, making her bloodred eyes stand out all the more. Her unworldly features were accompanied by unworldly beauty. It made her seem divine.

In contrast to her ethereal looks, her expression was rather childish. She was resting her chin on her hands at the edge of my bed, gazing at me with a delighted smile that had the sweetness of melted honey. She wasn't hiding her affection whatsoever. Normally, such an overt display of love would make me feel embarrassed, but because I was groggy from just waking up, all I felt now was honest happiness.

"Gerbera..."

I called her name and stretched out my hand, pinching her grinning lips. I wasn't really thinking of anything. I simply wanted to touch her, so I did. The sensation was as soft as I expected, and it satisfied my hazy mind. Her lips contracted on reflex, closing on my finger. I could feel her moist breath on my skin. Gerbera's white cheeks turned red, and her lips quivered as if she was battling her embarrassment, but she didn't run away or act displeased. She let me do as I pleased, her eyes feverishly wet.

"Hm...?"

Just then, I felt a faint pressure on my abdomen. I looked down and spotted an enormous spider leg covered in bushy white hair digging into my clothes. It was one of Gerbera's legs. This scene would probably have caused anyone else to faint if they didn't know anything, but naturally, I wasn't surprised. She'd merely touched me while I slept. It made us even for me touching her lips.

The pressure I felt against my belly seemed to be her reaction to having her

lips touched. I'd only crossed the line with Gerbera very recently. She still couldn't overcome her awkward inexperience, but patiently withstanding the urge to ravish me and tensing up like this was a form of growth.

As I thought about her lips, I managed to fully wake up. I pulled back my hand, moved her leg off my stomach, and sat up.

"Morning, Gerbera."

My voice still came out a little hoarse, but my mind was clear now.

"Mm. Morning, My Lord."

Gerbera traced her finger across her lips and smiled bashfully. I smiled back at her, then suddenly realized something.

"Did I maybe oversleep?" I asked.

I looked over to the open window. It was gloomy outside, but the sun was likely up already. We were currently in Draconia, a hidden settlement where a clan of dragons lived. Because of the Mist Barrier that the Misty Lodge had constructed, fog always covered the sky, leaving little room for sunlight.

"Just a bit," Gerbera answered. "There is still time before your usual training. You typically wake up so early, after all."

"I see. So you came to wake me up today?"

"Indeed. Plus, it means I can thoroughly enjoy gazing at your sleeping figure too."

"You came to wake me up...right?"

"Oh, um, I did try to wake you up. It's true. You just wouldn't."

I found this suspicious considering how careless she usually was. Having said that, I was aware that I was hard to wake.

"Excuse me," a voice said with a knock at the door. Rose entered, her braided gray hair swaying behind her. "Gerbera? Is our master... Oh, so you are awake, Master. Good morning."

Rose bowed politely. I was very familiar with her maid outfit now, but she wasn't wearing her usual long gloves. The puppet joints at her elbows and

fingers were out in the open. Her apron was a little wet, and I could smell something delicious from the doorway, so she must have been helping out in the kitchen.

Rose glanced at Gerbera, then turned back my way.

"I came because Lily said it was about time to wake you up," she said.

"Huh? Do you maybe consider me untrustworthy?" Gerbera asked. "I did wake him up, just so you know."

"No. I believed you would try, but if he didn't wake up, I figured you'd be fine with that and at least gaze at him in his sleep."

"O-Oh... When you see through me like that, I can't even protest..."

I chuckled as I watched Gerbera get flustered, then scratched my cheek.

"Oops, I guess now isn't the time to be laughing," I said. "I really should've woken up a little earlier."

"Oh come now, it's fine to have days like this once in a while, right?" Gerbera said.

Rose nodded along with her. "You can be overly serious, Master. Such days are fine every now and then."

"Don't spoil me too much," I said wryly. "I feel like I've been relaxing a bit too much here."

This was Draconia, a settlement where dragons hid from the world. As someone who traveled with monsters, I didn't have to worry about human eyes watching us like I always did. When I saw everyone acting so carefree, including Gerbera and Rose, all the tension left my body. Perhaps that was why I'd overslept a bit.

"Hrm. For my part, I'd rather you relax some more, My Lord," Gerbera said, pursing her lips and then smiling. "For example...something like this."

She'd spoken before she did anything, but she still managed to grab both me and Rose in an instant.

"Wha?!"

Like always, the Great White Spider of the Depths was admirably skilled...though it was questionable whether it was worthy of praise in this case. Gerbera used her momentum to push the two of us down, and all three of us tumbled onto the bed.

“Come now. Aha ha ha!”

“Hwahah?!”

Gerbera rolled about cheerfully while Rose shrieked—something I’d never heard before. Despite being so bashful about physical contact between lovers, Gerbera seemed fine with childish playfulness. Rose, on the other hand, inadvertently buried her face in my chest and started panicking uncharacteristically.

“H-Hey, st-sto— Ah! Gerbera!”

“Hee hee. It’s fine every now and then, right, Rose? Think of it as a side benefit.”

As things got boisterous, Asarina poked out from the back of my hand and stretched out her viny body. Seeing us all tangled up in bed, she cocked her head.

“Ssster!”

She must have thought we were playing, because she joined in, wrapping herself around all three of us. Rose flailed about, while Gerbera smiled. As for me, I was just surprised, but I figured this was nice once in a while and let my body relax.

A moment in time where I didn’t need to brace myself for anything. A fragment of what I truly wished for from the bottom of my heart. Here and now, it definitely existed. However, given our current situation, there was a certain type of danger to this too.

Once we arrived in Draconia, we heard about the former savior and the tragedy that had befallen him, the carapace wyrm Malvina, and their children. To prevent a similar disaster from happening, one born of a lack of understanding and an unfortunate encounter, we had to create our own place, one where we would be accepted. Therefore...

“Good morning, Takahiro.”

To make up for sleeping in, I hurried to get ready and then headed to our arranged meeting place where Shiran the elf awaited me. She had blonde hair and one blue eye. The right side of her face was covered by an eyepatch, and the left side revealed her pale white skin.

The reason for her paleness was because, after she became a demilich at Fort Tilia, blood no longer flowed through her veins. Despite this, she didn't look sickly, because her gallant expression reflected her strong will. Also, her experience fighting to protect others as a knight had given her an air of trustworthiness and benevolence.

Kei was lying faceup on the ground, her chest heaving up and down. Shiran had apparently been watching over her training before I got here. Lobivia, who'd also been watching, poked Kei's face with her tail.



“T-T-T-Takahiro?!” Kei sprung up when she noticed me, her cheeks somewhat flushed. “G-Good morning.”

Seeing Kei straighten out her skirt and flap her mouth open and shut, Shiran giggled.

“Now that Takahiro is here,” she said, “let us call this morning’s training to an end.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Go wipe off your sweat. Don’t forget to hydrate. It’s fine to spar with Lobivia afterward, but be sure to take regular breaks. I’m sorry to ask this of you, but please keep an eye on her, Lobivia. She’s not as bad as Takahiro, but she does tend to be unreasonable.”

“Mhm. Leave it to me,” Lobivia answered.

“Mrgh. I at least know my own body,” Kei pouted.

Shiran briefly patted Kei’s head to console her, then walked my way.

“Shall we begin, Takahiro?” Shiran asked, smiling.

“Yeah, I’ll be in your care,” I said. “Also, I’m sorry to ask, but could I borrow some of your time later? I’d like to consult with you about what we’re going to do after this.”

Shiran was a former knight of the Third Company of the Alliance Knights and a native of Aker, the country south of Draconia. She was one of the few people in this world’s society that I could trust. Her assistance was vital if we were to build a foundation to live here.

“Of course,” Shiran agreed, the unhidden side of her face brightening with a gentle smile.

It was the smile of a knight, an expression that protected others and gave them peace of mind. Like my servants, her smile reassured me of the path I was to follow in the future, albeit in a different sense.

We were going to Aker to start working on the resolution we’d made during our stay in Draconia. With our wishes for a warm future, we kept our eyes on

our destination. Our next stop was Shiran's hometown.

At the time, I still didn't know anything. I didn't know of the various incidents awaiting us, nor did I know that my relationship with Shiran would change greatly.

The time for our departure drew nearer.

Chapter 2: Leaving the Dragons' Settlement

North of Aker—one of the Five Northern Kingdoms—inside the Dark Woods serving as the border with the southern Empire, we approached the boundary of the Mist Barrier. The barrier covered Draconia like a giant dome, so our surroundings were shrouded in a thin veil of fog. As we made our way to leave the settlement, the fog grew thicker. It would eventually plunge everything into whiteness.

Lobivia came to a stop and turned around, her vivid red hair swaying behind her. Her eyes were fixed on the lake. Mysterious pillars of water stretched from the water's surface, continuously supplying the mist for the barrier covering the settlement. We could see houses dotting the shore. Lobivia's eyes were fixed on the island in the middle of the lake, though.

A sullen expression clung to her strong-willed features. Since we were connected by the mental path, I knew that she wasn't displeased. Instead, she didn't know what kind of expression to make.

"Let's go," she said with a big frown, her chestnut eyes now looking my way.

"That enough?" I asked.

Lobivia nodded. "Mhm."

We were leaving Draconia today. Since it was a hidden settlement, we couldn't stay here without a reason to. For Lobivia, however, this was her hometown, and she didn't know if she could ever come back to it. They were her family. Even if this place was only filled with bad memories for her, she surely had mixed feelings about it deep down inside.

Still, Lobivia was only reluctant to part with it for a few scant seconds. Even if she was mostly acting tough, the fact that she could endure it meant she was strong. I plopped my hand on the praiseworthy girl's head. She slapped it off immediately, just like usual.

"I'm glad to see you so energetic," I said, laughing.

Lobivia pouted and averted her eyes. “Takahiro...”

“Hm?”

“You said that I might be able to meet everyone from the settlement again one day, yeah?” she said quietly, almost snarling in the process. “So I ain’t gonna act all depressed.”

Her chestnut eyes turned once more to the island in the middle of the lake. There was a small, rugged mountain at its center. The mountain got up and looked our way.

“Malvina...”

The mountain was actually a dragon somewhere around fifty meters tall. She was the mother of all the dragons in the settlement, the carapace wurm Malvina. Her enormous body could easily be discerned at this distance. I wondered whether she could see us from there, half-covered in mist as we were. I didn’t know for sure, but since she’d gotten up with such good timing, I figured she could. Her parting with Lobivia had been a bit turbulent, but they were still mother and daughter. Lobivia looked at her mother, perhaps thinking of the day when they could reconcile.

Two women with the same red hair as Lobivia then approached us. They were Lobivia’s older sisters, Kath and Ella. The two of them had come to see us off as representatives of the clan.

“Lobivia. This is from everyone,” Kath said, placing a necklace around Lobivia’s neck.

“It’s a charm from our father’s homeland,” Ella added. “We pray that your future is blessed with good fortune.”

The necklace was decorated with a wood carving identical to the one the two older sisters wore. Even if it was their elder’s decision, I’d heard that some among the clan were still opposed to Lobivia’s leaving the settlement. In truth, Ella was one of them. Nevertheless, now that Lobivia’s departure had been decided, she couldn’t help but pray for her little sister’s safety.

“Kath, Ella...” Lobivia said, pausing for a moment before huffing to the side. “Take care...”

It took her everything she had to say that. Her face flushed, and her red hair trailed behind her as she turned around and quickly walked off. Lily signaled me with a glance to leave it to her, then followed Lobivia. I smiled slightly at her awkwardness, then turned back to the two dragons of Draconia.

“Thank you for your hospitality and care,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ella replied. “I pray that your journey goes safely, contractor of the Misty Lodge.”

“Lord Takahiro, please take care of Lobivia,” Kath added.

We were bidding farewell to them here. Kath had acted as our guide coming into Draconia, but Thaddeus would be the only one accompanying us to Diospyro.

“Also, if you ever feel like you’ve reached your limit in the human world, please do come back here at any time,” Ella said, lowering her voice a little. “We’ll welcome you with open arms. The elder told me to pass you this message.”

“Thank you,” I said, nodding.

I was grateful for Malvina’s kindness. Because she’d provided us with a place to run to if necessary, we didn’t need to be as careful. We could act and even take risks with less fear.

I turned on my heel, then came to a sudden stop. A huge, rocklike man over two meters tall walked our way through the thin veil of mist.

“Rex...?” I muttered.

It was one of Lobivia’s older brothers, the man most prejudiced against humans among all the dragons. His scowl was an unmistakable display of hostility. He was the same man who’d tried to forcefully drive us away from the settlement when we’d arrived. The others of my group who were still here subtly went on guard.

“Do you need something?” I asked, signaling everyone else to stand down.

“I have something to say, human.”

He’d forced his voice out with no attempt to hide his revulsion. There was

such a dangerous air to his glare that I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd suddenly transformed into a dragon and snapped at me. Tension built up around him as he prepared to speak.

"As the guardian of this settlement, I cannot possibly leave these lands." After a moment of silence, he added, "Take care of Patricia."

His expression was so sour that it seemed suitable to ask how many bitter bugs had flown into his mouth. Incidentally, Patricia was Lobivia's original name.

Silence fell over everyone, but a woman laughing broke it.

"Pffft. What was that, Rex?" Ella asked.

Rex's older sister was merciless. Even Thaddeus and Kath, who were close to him in age, smiled. I couldn't possibly laugh with them, but the gap between Rex's expression and his words was definitely comical.

Rex's rough face turned slightly red. Nevertheless, his strong gaze remained fixed on me, and his expression remained serious. I had to respond appropriately. I corrected my posture and looked him right in the eyes.

"Lobivia is precious to me too. I'll protect her to the very limits of my strength."

After Rex spent several seconds ascertaining my very being, he replied bluntly, "Her name is Patricia. Don't refer to her by that weird name."

I unintentionally smirked. Even now, he never referred to her as Lobivia. He really was a helpless, obstinate blockhead. However, it was certain that he also thought dearly of his little sister.

Just then, a tremendous force hit Rex's head with a thud. A knapsack had flown into the side of his rocklike face with terrifying speed.

"Rex! You dumbass!" Lobivia roared from afar. "The hell're you saying?! I keep telling you my name is Lobivia, dammit!"

We hadn't been talking quietly, so she must have overheard us. Lobivia stomped on the ground, her face completely red. Rex maintained his sour look and picked up the knapsack. After wiping off the dirt, he held it out to me.

“Take care of her.”

“Sure thing.”

I accepted the bag, and his request, and left Draconia.

Chapter 3: The Puppet's Path to Romance *Rose's*

POV

This happened on our way back to Diospyro from Draconia. It was the middle of the night, and everyone was asleep. Only those who required no sleep were active at this time. I could hear Mana's peaceful breathing right by my side. Her sleeping face was even more innocent than it was during the day. Her dainty hand tightly gripped the hem of my skirt.



Now that I thought of it, during our time in the Woodlands, Lily had stayed by our master's side during the night, while I stayed near Mana so that we could immediately act if something happened. Before we knew it, this had become a custom of ours.

We were no longer in the Woodlands, and our master had more servants and travel companions now, so our journey was exponentially safer than before. We didn't need to stay close to the two of them anymore. Nevertheless, it gave me peace of mind when Mana was close to me like this. I'd gotten accustomed to hearing her soft breathing as I worked, so I didn't plan on quitting this habit.

"Mm..."

Mana stirred slightly, perhaps having some kind of dream. I felt a sensation filling me up somewhere deep inside my chest, and that turned into a smile. This was probably the most natural smile I could possibly make with this fabricated face of mine.

I raised my gaze from Mana. In front of me, I saw an enraptured white spider. That was the only way I could describe her.

"Heh. Heh heh..."

Her satisfied smile and unsightly expression utterly warped her peerless beauty.

"Eheh heh heh heh..."

What exactly was going through her mind? First, it looked like she was grinning and turning bright red, then she put her hands to her cheeks and silently cheered. After that, she started rummaging through the magic bag that held her things.

She pulled out the comb and brushes she'd requested I make just the other day. She combed her hair, brushed down her spider fluff, and diligently smoothed the difficult-to-reach places using the long-handled brush. Once she was done, she began manipulating threads in her hands.

I'd seen this meticulously woven cocoon before. According to Mana, certain spiders wrapped their eggs in cocoons. She'd also said that it was like a human

making clothes for a future baby.

Well, I could understand that she was preparing for the future, but as far as I knew, she'd made over twenty of them already, in the middle of the night. What was even more terrifying was that her pace hadn't dropped at all. Wasn't she making too many? How many was she planning to weave, anyway? I watched her, but Gerbera didn't seem to notice. Her bloodred eyes were feverishly moist as she finished her meticulous cocoon and put it in her magic bag. After that, she returned to indulging herself in reverie, a huge grin on her face.

It was an entire festival of suspicious behavior. Lily, who was practicing partial mimicry by our master's side as he slept, also smiled wryly at this. Gerbera slept in the manamobile during the day, since she had to hide herself within it, so she probably wasn't lacking sleep. Still, too much enthusiasm could be poisonous.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, Gerbera," I said.

"Hrm?" Gerbera blinked in confusion.

"It looks like your relationship with our master is going well."

"O-Oh? How can you tell?"

"It's clear as day."

Did she really have to ask after all this time? She lost all restraint like this at night when fewer eyes were around, but even during the day, she was always in great humor. It would be stranger not to notice.

Given the timing of her behavior, I could even conjecture that her relationship with our master had progressed during our stay in Draconia. Yet, somehow, Gerbera looked surprised to hear this.

"How amazing, Rose. You can tell just by looking?"

She couldn't possibly be so unaware of her own behavior, right? I was speechless. I looked at Gerbera's face again but couldn't see anything there aside from genuine astonishment. I was even more surprised than she was. Having said that, this was pretty typical of her.

"In any case...I'm glad it's going smoothly," I said, pulling myself together.

“Congratulations, Gerbera.”

Gerbera had been in love with our master ever since our time in the Woodlands. Even after he’d accepted her feelings, she couldn’t make love to him—and this was entirely her own fault.

If her heart’s desire had been granted, then nothing could make me happier. As her fellow servant, and as her older sister, of course I would give her my blessings. However, after I congratulated her, Gerbera gave me an odd look.

“What’s the matter?” I asked curiously.

Gerbera awkwardly scratched her cheek. “Mm. In truth, there’s a part of me that wonders if this is all right.”

“Surely you aren’t dissatisfied with your relationship with our master, are you?”

It wasn’t my intent, but my voice had come out deeper than I’d meant, and Gerbera jolted.

“I-I’m not. Never. There’s no way I could possibly be. Our lord was very gentle, and he tried many things until we both felt good, and was very considerate of me since it was my first time.”

“Is that so?”

That was fine then. In the confusion of the moment, Gerbera had said something rather descriptive, but taking our master’s feelings into consideration, I decided that I hadn’t heard anything.

“The kiss was particularly amazing. That surprised me. It felt like my mind and body were melting... I wonder if that’s a result of Lily’s training?”

Yes, I didn’t hear a thing. I didn’t see Lily’s huge smile either. Anyway, Gerbera didn’t seem displeased. In fact, it was impossible she felt that way, considering that unsightly expression glued to her face.

“Then what do you mean by, ‘I wonder if this is all right’?” I asked.

“Well... How do I put it? I worry that there is a proper order, you know?”

Her reply didn’t make any sense to me.

“A proper order?” I asked.

“I mean, consider Katou. When it comes to our lord, she is a complete train wreck. In a sense, I wonder if this will light a fire under her. But in your case, I don’t believe it will.”

“You don’t believe what will?”

“I suppose that’s exactly what I mean. I won’t stop marching on just because I worry about it, though. How difficult this is...”

Gerbera folded her arms beneath her breasts and began groaning.

“Say, Rose?” she started, her red eyes turning to me once more. “I asked you this once before, but...you’ve been adorning your body so that our lord will hug you, correct?”

“Correct. What about it?”

“Things were left unsettled the last time I asked. Even now, do you not think about what comes after that?”

She’d asked me the same question before we visited Diospyro the last time. I threw a glance at our master, making sure he was sound asleep, then answered as quietly as I could.

“No, I do. It’s true. Somewhere inside me, I want what comes next. I realized that desire was always there.”

I’d felt this way during my first date with my master. I wanted him to hug me. I wanted him to embrace me tightly, as a puppet and as a girl. I’d put in the effort to achieve that, believing that was all there was to my wish.

But I’d been mistaken. Somewhere inside me, I wished for more. Mana and Gerbera had once told me that I lacked desire, yet I’d been so happy just spending time walking around town with my master that I’d finally realized the truth.

“That means you were right, Gerbera,” I said.

“Ooh, I see. So you have also decided to ravish our lord!”

Gerbera leaned forward in excitement as I held out my palm.

“No. Please, wait. That’s wrong.”

“Hrm?”

“I don’t want to do that,” I said, pushing Gerbera back. “Actually, I don’t even know *what* I want to do with our master.”

“You don’t?” she asked, giving me a weird look. “What a strange thing to say. Is it not your own desire?”

“It is. But I really don’t know.”

I absolutely wished for what came after a hug, but that was nothing more than a vague expectation. It was blind hope. Even when I thought about what came after, I couldn’t picture it concretely. It was fluffy and brilliant like a shining cloud. That was about all I could see. But maybe that only made sense. Mana had once pointed something out to me. My heart was underdeveloped and inexperienced, so much so that I didn’t understand it myself.

“I guess I’m just terribly dense regarding my own desires?” I added.

“Mrgh. But you know you want our lord to hug you, right?” Gerbera asked.

“That’s because I’ve experienced it once. I can want for it to happen again because I know what it feels like.”

“You mean to say that you cannot wish for something you’re incapable of imagining?” Gerbera asked, swaying slightly. “Then, Rose, do you want to embrace our lord, kiss him, let him touch you, and make love?”

I froze. What was she even asking? Picturing those things was well beyond my reach. It wasn’t just that I lacked imagination—the concept didn’t even exist to me in the first place. Honestly speaking, I couldn’t even think straight after being asked such a candid question.

However, Gerbera continued to stare at me with a meaningful expression. She hadn’t said it in a joking manner; she was serious. She really wanted me to give it some thought. So, just for a bit, I allowed myself to fantasize about something well beyond my means.

I immediately reached my limit, though. Embrace? Kiss? Touch? Make love? With my master? When it was stated so specifically, it had no sense of reality. In

the past, I'd thought that my simple wish of wanting him to hug me was already overreaching. Even now, there were parts of me that still believed it was. How, then, could I possibly describe any act beyond that? I didn't know what they were, and it was difficult for me to picture what they'd be.

"I can't even imagine it..." I honestly admitted.

"Unlike Gerbera, you don't have a reproductive instinct as a species," Lily said, throwing me a lifeline. "And you can't learn from someone else's memories and senses like I did from Miho. It makes sense, then, that you feel so estranged from these concepts."

"Hmm. I see. Is that how it works?" Gerbera asked.

"Well, her personality is a factor too. Rose is like the personification of loyalty, and she's so serious."

Apparently, they could understand my feelings at a glance. I had no awareness that I wished for such an outrageous thing, so I was left bewildered.

Seeing me like this, Lily held back her smile and looked at me sincerely. "Rose, I don't know what will kick things off for you...but when the time comes, you have to properly accept it, okay? That will surely become your most priceless treasure."

Her words were filled with the affection of an older sister. At the same time, they were also filled with conviction. She knew that the day would certainly come.

Before I knew it, I nodded back to her. "Understood, sister."

"Very good." She smiled with satisfaction, but then her smile changed to a teasing grin.

"For the time being, you want our master to hug you, right? Speaking of kicking things off, that's a good starting point."

"S-Sister...?"

"Isn't it about time you try coaxing him into giving you one?"

"I can't possibly!"

“Ooh, that sounds nice,” Gerbera joined in. “Either way, there are things you won’t find out until you try taking action.”

They were having fun and half joking around, but the remaining half was definitely serious. It was a little troubling, since I hadn’t found a way to resolve myself. All the same, my sisters were trying to give me a good push on the back because I was always like this. I was grateful for their consideration, but I also felt pathetic that I couldn’t meet their expectations.

I was feeling a little down, but Shiran saved me by coming back from patrol.

“I’ve returned. Oh? It looks like you’re all having fun,” she said.

“Welcome back, Shiran,” Lily greeted her. “Huh? Were there monsters again?” Lily’s nose twitched. She’d detected the scent of blood. “Are you injured? You’re back a little later than usual today.”

“I’m fine. Thank you for your concern,” Shiran replied with a smile, which completely contrasted with Lily’s worried expression. “I apologize for being late. Berta has gone back to her master, so I figured it would be prudent to do a more thorough patrol.”

“Oh. Mhm. That’s perfectly reasonable, but...”

“A little blood sprayed on me, so I will go wash off. Rose, could you lend me the whole set?”

“Very well. Just a moment.”

I pulled out a somewhat large washbasin and a towel from my magic bag and handed them to Shiran. She accepted them with a smile and moved somewhere out of sight. The whole while, Lily stared at her back.

“Is something the matter, sister?” I asked.

“Hmm. It’s about Shiran,” she replied, looking pensive. “She’s been fighting monsters for us quite frequently, right?”

“Yes, she has. Shiran has been a major factor in maintaining our master’s safety at night.”

There were a fair number of nocturnal monsters. During our time in the Woodlands, we’d been attacked in the dead of night on multiple occasions. It

hadn't happened recently, though, because Shiran had been patrolling our campsites to exterminate any nearby monsters.

"I truly do admire her diligence," I said.

"Mhm. I do too. But you know..." Lily said, her intentions unclear.

"Is there a problem?"

Lily hesitated for a moment, then said, "I feel like Shiran comes back having encountered *too* many monsters."

"How so?"

"I mean, we don't meet that many during the day, right? Do their numbers really jump up like that just 'cause it's nighttime?"

"Aah..."

Now that she mentioned it, that didn't make sense. It was pretty rare for us to bump into any monsters during the day. This region was close to the Woodlands, but it wasn't actually the Woodlands. It was certainly a harsh environment to live in, but there were nowhere near as many monsters inhabiting the area. Also, the Order of National Defense eradicated ones in the vicinity of the main roads connecting Aker's towns. These factors curbed the number of monsters we might encounter.

Nevertheless, Lily often used her wolflike sense of smell to point out that Shiran had fought monsters on her patrol. Even then, it wasn't like she could detect it every single time. Maybe there'd been times she hadn't been sure and hadn't mentioned it. It was possible Shiran had defeated even more monsters than we knew of, then.

"But Lily, didn't Berta also hunt monsters every evening?" Gerbera pointed out. "She also found several every time. Is it not the same?"

"She went out to hunt," Lily answered. "She was going about actively seeking prey. Isn't that different from what Shiran does?"

"Hmm. You have a point there."

Now that Gerbera looked convinced, Lily looked toward the tree line where Shiran had gone.

“I don’t think this should be happening unless she covers a fairly wide area. That’s something to be grateful for, but...”

“Is she pushing herself a little too hard again?” I asked, looking in the same direction with concern.

“Maybe... Well, before she left, Berta said, ‘Do something about your own group’s problem.’”

“Our group’s problem, you say?”

“Mhm. I think it was a slip of the tongue. She managed to brush it off at the time, but just maybe...”

Our master had worried for a while about Shiran’s tendency to push herself too hard. It made sense then that the problem Berta had mentioned was related to her. Nonetheless, something about this stuck out to me.

If that was in fact a problem, why would Berta dodge the question? There was no reason to do so if the problem was already known. I didn’t know the truth, of course. Berta had returned to Kudou’s side, so we couldn’t ask her anymore. It wasn’t even definite that the problem she’d mentioned was related to Shiran to begin with.

Still, something about this bothered me. Perhaps it also bothered Lily, because a shadow of anxiety fell over her as she continued staring into the trees.



In the end, we consulted our master about it and decided to indirectly keep an eye on things. Having said that, Shiran’s tendency to push herself too far was already on our minds, so we would spot any new developments right away. In the meantime, we arrived in Diospyro.

Much like last time, Lily stayed behind in the manamobile with the others who couldn’t enter town. First, we headed to the inn to rendezvous with Fukatsu, who’d been waiting for us there. Once we reached the street where the inn was, a woman called out to us.

“Ooh! Is that you, Shiran?! And Kei too!”

A young woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, and tapered ears walked down the street toward us. She was an elf. Her cheerful smile made her cheekbones more prominent, but her features resembled Shiran's and Kei's somewhat. It didn't seem to be an accidental resemblance either. In a rare showing, Shiran looked at her in a complete daze.

"Auntie...?"

"Long time no see," the woman replied with a nostalgic smile.



Chapter 4: The Reclamation Village's Crisis

The unexpected reunion surprised the two elves greatly, especially Kei, whose eyes were wide as saucers. In any case, standing around in shock wouldn't help anything. The inn was nearby, and since Leah and her nieces likely had a lot to talk about, we decided to move over there. After we quickly got our rooms booked at the front desk, we popped by Fukatsu's room, where Thaddeus parted ways with us, then headed to one of our own rooms.

"This is my aunt Leah," Shiran explained after we'd settled down.

"So you're Leah? I've heard a lot about you," I said.

Since we were going to visit Shiran's hometown, Shiran had told me a number of things beforehand. Leah was the wife of Rapha's chief. Rapha was a reclamation village close to Shiran's hometown of Kehdo. Leah was Shiran's mother's older sister, making her Kei's great-aunt. She was relatively old, but elves had longer life spans than regular humans, so based on her appearance and demeanor, she looked to be in her twenties.

"This is Majima Takahiro and Katou Mana," Shiran continued. "You may have heard the rumors on the wind already. Several months ago, an unprecedented number of saviors arrived at Fort Ebenus. These two are saviors who came to this world with them."

In all the towns we'd visited until now, we concealed that we were visitors to avoid any trouble. Instead, we pretended to be descendants of visitors, those of blessed blood. However, we'd already discussed this exact situation beforehand, so Shiran introduced us as visitors to her aunt.

One reason she did so was because we were planning on staying in Kehdo for the time being. If we were only passing through and didn't have many opportunities to interact with the locals, then we could probably get by acting as blessed blood without letting it slip. But during a prolonged stay, that would be difficult.

The far more important reason, though, considering the future, was that hiding our identities would hinder developing trust. After we heard about the past savior in Draconia, we'd decided to do everything we could to create a place in this world where we could be accepted.

That said, it would be unwise to let information that visitors were staying in Shiran's hometown spread too far. Visitors were of utmost importance to this world. If we got caught up in some local dispute, it could take all we had to deal with it, making it more difficult to accomplish our goal.

Nevertheless, after discussing it with Shiran, we'd concluded that this was somewhat improbable. First, we weren't going to recklessly announce that we were visitors more than necessary. The only places we planned on revealing our identities were Kehdo and the neighboring Rapha, which had extremely close relations to Kehdo.

Second, villagers normally didn't encounter anyone outside of their own village. This world was rampant with monsters, so there was a striking number of people who'd never left the village they were born in. Towns were a different story, due to trade coming and going to match their increased scale, but such traffic was extremely limited in villages. That was to say nothing of reclamation villages tasked with clearing the most dangerous lands of this world. Trade was basically nonexistent in those.

And lastly, considering that the commander, a member of the beloved royal family, had invited us to stay here in secret, an information leak was pretty much impossible. That was Shiran's opinion as a local of a reclamation village, and I agreed with her. If we were to fear taking any risks even with all these conditions in place, we wouldn't be able to do anything at all.

"Yes. I've heard stories that a great many saviors have arrived," Leah said with a nod, then turned my way. "I never thought I would get to meet any, though. Takahiro, Mana, it is an honor to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise," I replied.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Katou added.

Now that our introductions were done, we moved on to the rest of my companions.

“This girl is serving as my attendant. Her name is Rose.”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Leah,” Rose said.

We decided that all of my servants should be treated as my attendants. We couldn’t possibly tell the truth, so this was a passable way of getting by without really lying. I prayed the day would come when we could reveal everything as I finished the rest of the introductions.

“Anyway, I guess news of the visitors’ arrival has gotten all the way to Aker,” I said. “I thought it’d take longer.”

“It hasn’t reached all the villages yet, but an official notification was sent to all towns through the church,” Leah explained. “I had business here, so I came a few days ago, and I heard the stories then.”

“Is that so? That makes things quick, then.”

I started to recount our circumstances to Leah. I told her about our arrival at Fort Tilia and the fortress’s fall due to a certain incident. I told her about how the survivors, including Shiran and Kei, had had to abandon the fortress and go into the Woodlands. I told her about how the commander had invited us to Aker due to that connection and how she’d been delayed in returning to her country. Then I told her about our plans to stay in Shiran’s hometown in secret until the commander returned.

There were some facts I couldn’t mention, but I still managed to give a rough idea of why we’d come to Aker with Shiran.

After listening to our story, Leah stood up and walked over to Kei.

“Auntie...?”

“You’ve gone through so much.” Leah wrapped her arms around the bewildered little girl. She gently brushed her back, then turned to Shiran. Her eyes were fixed on the eyepatch hiding half of Shiran’s face. “I’m glad you made it back.”

“It is all thanks to Takahiro,” Shiran replied, smiling affectionately. “Especially for me. He saved me from great danger.”

“I see,” Leah said with a nod before bowing to me. “Thank you very much, sir.

Because of you, I got to see my nieces again.”

“You don’t have to thank me. Shiran has saved me too.”

According to what Shiran had told me, Leah had lost three of her four children. Life in reclamation villages was always accompanied by danger. The death of a relative was, unfortunately, a familiar tragedy to them. That made Leah’s reunion with her nieces even more of a blessing. Her expression was filled with relief and gratitude from the bottom of her heart. It warmed my own heart to see it.

“By the way, auntie,” Shiran said after we reached a good stopping point and Leah returned to her seat, “why are you in Diospyro? Don’t tell me something happened to the village...” She looked both suspicious and concerned in equal measure.

Leah finished wiping the corners of her eyes, then straightened her posture before answering.

“Right. I came here to tell you about that, but...”

Leah gazed at me meaningfully.

I exchanged glances with Katou, then said, “Don’t mind us. Go ahead.”

“But...”

“What happened?” I urged her on in a slightly stronger tone.

With that, Leah began awkwardly explaining the situation.

“Actually, our village of Rapha and its neighbors are under threat by azure hares.”

I grimaced. Shiran had told me about these monsters before.

“If I recall, they’re native to the Woodlands in southern Aker, right?” I said. “They aren’t all that powerful, but they breed at fixed intervals, reproducing in great numbers that cause major damage.”

“You’re well informed, sir.”

“But auntie, what do you mean by ‘under threat’?” Shiran asked, looking dubious. “The azure hares’ breeding period is troublesome, but we know when

the seasons for it are. The Order of National Defense and the Royal Army should be mobilizing to deal with it.”

Shiran’s suspicion was reasonable. Their breeding season was periodic, so they could predict when it would happen and prepare.

“About that,” Leah said gravely, “in a turn of horrible luck, with no relation to the azure hares, ruby bears have been causing a lot of damage lately.”

“That’s bad...” Shiran muttered, her expression now grim.

“Ruby bears are native to the Woodlands of southern Aker too, right?” I asked.

“Yes. They are considerably strong for the region,” Shiran answered, with a heavy nod. “If they’re on the rise, then the order and the army will have no choice but to prioritize them.”

“Now that you mention it, when we dropped by the army last time, we heard there were multiple eyewitness reports of monsters in the neighboring villages.”

We’d heard this from Shiran’s acquaintance Adolf, who worked for the army now. One of the eyewitness reports had been about the stray dragon, Lobivia, but the ruby bears were likely another reason that the army had been so busy as of late.

“At the time, Adolf didn’t seem to think things were too pressing,” I added.

“The situation may have worsened faster than expected. It seems I’ll have to inquire about the details,” Shiran said, looking serious. She then turned to Leah. “Even though it’s not the azure hares’ breeding season, the order and the army don’t have enough manpower to help. Did you come all the way to Diospyro to make a petition, then?”

“Yes. That’s why I’m here,” Leah answered. “Even now, there have been sightings of azure hares near the village. We residents of the reclamation villages need to go into the forest and clear the trees out, but we can’t do that now because we don’t know when the village will be attacked. I came to report that we can no longer postpone this matter.”

“What response did you get?” Shiran asked.

“They promised to send troops as soon as possible...but it’s questionable whether they’ll make it in time.”

Leah lowered her eyes and sighed gloomily. The situation must have been bothering her pretty badly. Darkness seeped into her expression.

“Having said that, this is all we can do,” she added. “Just as I was about to give up and return home, I heard rumors that you had returned to Aker, Shiran.”

Shiran had visited Adolf the last time we were in town. The Alliance Knights were already pretty popular in Aker, so very few people were unaware that the Third Company’s lieutenant had visited.

That was probably how Leah had heard of it. However, by the time she reached our inn, we’d already left for Draconia. This had discouraged her greatly, but just then, someone unexpected had called out to her. Fukatsu, who was staying in the same inn, had just happened to cross her path. He had told Leah that Shiran would be coming back, so Leah and her fellow villagers had decided to wait here for the past few days.

“I see. I understand the situation,” Shiran said as she glanced at me.

Right away, I knew what she wanted to say. I nodded and turned to Leah. She looked hesitant, but as she met my eyes, she resolved herself and said, “My apologies, sir. We’ve gone off—”

“Before that, Leah, I have a proposal. Will you hear me out?” I said, cutting her off. “We’re strong enough to fight monsters. We’re nowhere near the level of the other visitors, but I think we can be of assistance, at least for this. We might not be all you were hoping for, but I’d like to help. What do you think?”

“A-Are you sure?” Leah asked, astonishment written on her features.

“Yes. Seeing as we’re going to live in Shiran’s hometown, this concerns us too.”

I answered immediately because we’d already talked about this. We were planning on staying in Shiran’s hometown for a while, but we weren’t going to freeload the entire time. Well, in this world, perhaps a savior would be forgiven

for doing so, but I didn't want to be treated like that.

So what could we do? For one, Rose's ability to make magic tools would be tremendously helpful. We could even start a business. But, then again, her works were a little too special in this world, so that might make us stand out too much. For now, at least, it was better to keep that hidden. Dealing with monsters was a pretty safe alternative.

During our brief encounter with the Skanda lino Yuna, we'd heard that the exploration team had agreed to suppress the monsters around Fort Ebonus. In short, we would be doing the same thing. Just maybe, the exploration team's leader Nakajima Kojirou had gone through a similar thought process. It made me feel a little sympathetic toward him.

We didn't have the extraordinary power of the exploration team, but we'd still managed to survive in the Depths and had developed our strengths even to this day. We could help take on monsters from the Fringes. In truth, the reason I'd already heard about azure hares and ruby bears from Shiran was because I'd been considering how we could help with the monster suppression and the village's defense.

Our chance to help had come with more urgency than expected, but it didn't change what had to be done. We could be of use, and then we wouldn't be freeloading. This would also help me find trustworthy allies.

I was a visitor, and visitors were treated like saviors here, so it was easy to gain trust. However, if the truth were to come to light, it would shake the foundation of that trust. If people knew that monsters accompanied me, there was no telling whether the label of a savior would be enough to maintain a relationship. We needed to make sure that their trust in us was a certainty before that happened.

"Th-Thank you very much, sir."

Leah now looked so delighted that she was liable to leap with joy. And, just like that, we'd agreed to suppress the azure hares.



We decided to stay in Diospyro for two days so that we could ask the army

about the situation. Shiran had contacted Adolf on the day we arrived, and she went to speak with him the following day.

In the meantime, we said our farewells to Thaddeus.

“Since you’ll be staying in this country for a while, I will return to my journey as the clan’s explorer,” Thaddeus said.

The explorer’s role was to find land that the entire clan could move to in the unlikely event that their current settlement was discovered. Therefore, Thaddeus couldn’t stay with us for too long.

“Lobivia, you be a good girl now,” he said.

“Hmph.” Lobivia let out a curt snort, but once she saw Thaddeus’s sad expression, she panicked. “I-I ain’t gonna cause no trouble. I’ll do all I can so that I don’t.”

“I see. That’s good then.”

After hesitating a little, Thaddeus reached out and placed his hand atop Lobivia’s head. His usual gentle manner always gave the impression that he wasn’t very skilled at such things, but even taking that into account, his movements were still unexpectedly awkward. This was probably the first physical contact they’d had since Lobivia had managed to take a human form.

Even as Lobivia frowned, she kept still.



After pulling back his hand, Thaddeus turned my way.

“I plan on walking around the Five Northern Kingdoms for a while. Contact me if something happens. I might be able to be of help. I’ll teach you how to reach me.”

Thaddeus had made connections all over the world during his long vagabond life, so one could contact him by going through certain firms and the merchants associated with them, even if it would take some time. That was apparently how Draconia had contacted him about Lobivia.

After Thaddeus gave me the details, I took Lobivia and Kei to the marketplace so that we could restock the various goods that we’d used up during our journey. While we were at it, I decided we should get lunch too.

“There really is a lotta good food in town, huh?” Lobivia muttered while stuffing her cheeks with the chewy potato-based bread we’d eaten a lot of in Aker.

Whenever she ate, the sharpness of her features would soften somewhat, making her look like an innocent child.

“It was all potato and water plants in the settlement. The meat was good, though,” she added.

“Diospyro is one of the towns that supports the circulation of all goods in Aker,” I told her. “It can’t be compared to the settlement.”

“Our village isn’t all that different from the settlement,” Kei said, joining in. “But unlike the settlement, it’s even hard to get meat there.”

“That so...?” Lobivia looked a little disappointed, but then she stuffed the bread in her mouth again. “Tasty meat...” she mumbled miserably.

“Well, in that case, we can just hunt some ourselves,” I said, trying to cheer her up.

If we ended up being some kind of bodyguards for the village, we could simply hunt while we were at it.

Lobivia’s expression considerably brightened at the idea.

“I’ll hunt too!”

“No, you should probably refrain. It’ll be bad if you transform near the village.”

It would cause a huge fuss if a dragon suddenly appeared in the village’s vicinity. It was good that she was motivated, but we couldn’t afford to disturb the peace.

“Then...how ’bout I just hunt like this?” Lobivia asked.

“Can you fight like that? You don’t know how to use any weapons, right? Oh, your claws, fangs, and tail are a no go too.”

“Th-Then...barehanded?”

“That would be super conspicuous... Maybe we should give it some thought. Oh, I have an idea. Let’s ask Rose about it.”

As we talked, we finished our shopping and returned to the inn.

“Huh?”

“Yo, Majima.”

We bumped into Fukatsu Aketora in the hallway. Or rather, he seemed to be waiting for me to return.

“Got a sec to chat?” he asked.

“Sure...”

So I said, but this was pretty unexpected. Fukatsu had already apologized about the quarrel we’d gotten into before, and he hadn’t shown any animosity toward us lately. Still, that didn’t mean we’d had many opportunities to talk.

“Right on. This way.”

Fukatsu brought me to the room he was staying in. Kei and Lobivia followed along. Thaddeus seemed to be out, because I couldn’t spot him anywhere.

“There was somethin’ I thought I should tell you before we leave,” he started.

“What about?”

“The Colony. About the day it got destroyed, to be exact.”

“Aah...”

Fukatsu had been part of the exploration team, but not the first expeditionary force. I’d heard that he was in the Colony on that day. Our positions had been different, but we had both survived the Colony’s destruction. We’d never talked about the details of what transpired that day, though.

“How much do you know ’bout what happened?” he asked.

I smiled bitterly. “That’s pretty abrupt of you...”

Still, there was no telling when we could broach this topic again if we let this opportunity pass, so I could understand why he was bringing it up now. Besides, I had no reason to hold my tongue. Although, it was more that I didn’t have a good grasp on what had happened, so nothing I could say would become a hindrance to my group.

“In my case, before I knew what was going on, the stealing and killing had already started,” I answered. “The guys with power, those without it—they were all driven by fear. That’s all I remember. I was just a powerless member of the home team back then, so I didn’t have the time or the capacity to observe anything more than that.”

“I’m surprised you made it outta there...” Fukatsu said.

“I was just lucky.”

People driven by panic could turn into beasts. I’d been trampled on and nearly killed, and it was just a coincidence that I’d made it out alive. It still hurt my heart to think back on it. I felt blessed now and could accept what had happened in the past, but the pain itself wasn’t gone. It would probably stay with me for the rest of my life.

I took a breath and clenched my fists. A small finger touched my hand. It was Lobivia. She awkwardly pushed her fingers between mine. Her hand was warm and childish. Perhaps the pain I felt had been conveyed to her.

After giving her hand a squeeze, I asked, “What about you, Fukatsu?”

“It was pretty much the same for me. Before I knew it, it was already like

that.”

Fukatsu grimaced. It was most likely an unpleasant memory for him too.



“It’s just...I heard somethin’ weird.”

“Something weird?”

“Yeah. I’m sure you already know, but the atmosphere in the Colony was messed up that day. It was pretty much a powder keg to begin with, so once our leader took the first expeditionary force away, everyone lost their restraints. Still, it’s not like they hadn’t taken steps to handle that.”

“Nicknamed cheaters, you mean,” I said. Iino had told me about this before. “The Beast of Darkness and the Absolute Blade stayed behind, right?”

“Yeah. Almost all the elites joined the expeditionary force, but a few stayed behind. With the Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya and the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji at its core, an emergency response force was put together so things would work out if anything happened. Well, by ‘anything,’ they meant monsters. Even so, at that point, they were definitely the strongest guys around.”

“So, what about it?”

“The weird part comes next. I dunno what spark blew the powder keg to hell and started it all. Kill or be killed—before I knew it, that idea dominated everything. At that time, I tried to report to the emergency response force. I thought they’d be able to do somethin’.”

Fukatsu paused, then violently shook his head before continuing.

“No. That’s a lie. There’s no point in actin’ cool. I was just pissed at ‘em for not handlin’ it already. I wasn’t all that different from the rampagin’ assholes.”

“Fukatsu...”

He smiled cynically, but he quickly pulled it back.

“Well, enough of that. Either way, there was no point.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, scowling. “Are you saying they couldn’t have stopped it?”

“No, not that,” Fukatsu answered, shaking his head. “That ain’t it. I couldn’t even report to them. Before I could, someone offed the emergency response

force.”

“They were killed...?”

“Yeah. Seems it wasn’t all of ’em, but they definitely couldn’t function as a group no more. In truth, we never saw ’em do nothin’ to try and control the panic.”

A dark shadow then fell over Fukatsu’s eyes.

“It was rough,” he spat out. “Even the guys who somehow held out got their spirits broken. After that...nothin’ could be done.”

I remembered the first time I met Fukatsu. He hated other visitors. That was surely because of the chain of events that came after this point in his story. Something had happened to him too. I wasn’t so cruel as to try digging any deeper, though.

“That’s why a thought came to mind,” he said. “The reason our Colony fell apart so fast was maybe ’cause somethin’ happened to the emergency response force from the get-go.”

“You’re saying they couldn’t stop things, not because of a lack of awareness, but because they were taken out before they could act?”

“Well, I’m just sayin’ it’s possible. I don’t got no proof,” Fukatsu replied with a casual shrug. His expression was nowhere near as light as his gesture. “I say someone offed ’em, but I dunno how many actually died. Also, the idea that they got taken out first is just my guess, based on findin’ out they’d kicked the bucket by the time I knew what was goin’ on. Maybe I just noticed too late. I didn’t see their bodies or nothin’ either, so thinkin’ back on it now, I don’t even know if they really died.”

“So it’s just a theory.”

“Yeah. That’s the gist of it.”

There was nothing certain about his story, but these were words from someone who’d been there. What’s more, they came from someone who hadn’t been entirely focused on running away and surviving like I had. It was worth hearing him out.

“The Colony’s destruction might not be as simple as we thought it was,” Fukatsu added. “There might still be somethin’ behind it. You’re gonna live on in this world, yeah? And...Katou too. If so, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to hear this.”

“I see... Thanks. That’s good to know.”

“No problem. I owe you for helpin’ Thaddeus and all.”

I could see that wasn’t his only reason, but Fukatsu didn’t mention anything else.

“I’m plannin’ on goin’ round the world with Thaddeus,” he said. “We might bump into each other again.”

With that, we parted ways with Fukatsu. If we got the chance to meet again, I thought maybe it would be good to talk with him some more.

The following day, Shiran returned with information from the army regarding monsters in the vicinity. They were also very worried about the state of things, so when Shiran visited Adolf, she’d stayed there overnight to participate in a meeting.

Now armed with the information we needed, we left Diospyro.

Chapter 5: The Elven Reclamation Village

After leaving Diospyro, we rendezvoused with Lily and Gerbera, who'd been waiting outside town, then headed west toward Leah's village. Five elves from the reclamation village, including Leah, accompanied us. Each of them wore light armor, bore a sword at their waist, and carried a shield and bow. It wasn't unusual for villagers to carry weapons in Aker, where a militaristic ethos drove the nation, but seeing them so fully armed made them look like soldiers. They were on high alert because of the azure hares' breeding season.

Leah and the other elves had come to town to stock up on goods while they petitioned for help, so they also had their own manamobile. Our two vehicles clattered down a narrow path, one behind the other. During the journey, Shiran and Kei peacefully chatted with the villagers.

In most cases, the residents of Aker's elven reclamation villages were consanguineous—they all came from a single tribe. In other words, all of the villagers were blood relatives of the chief family. Since Shiran and Kei were Leah's blood relatives, they were also related to the other villagers.

Shiran had returned after becoming a lieutenant in the Alliance Knights, and saviors were accompanying her, so the elves traveling with us were naturally curious about all sorts of things. However, unlike Shiran and Kei, who were getting along with the elves, Gerbera and Ayame had to remain hidden inside the manamobile. I was a little anxious with the elves so close, but Lobivia stayed with them the entire time, having taken it upon herself to prevent any problems.

"Lobiviaaaa! Dinner's ready," Lily called.

"Got it. I'll be right there."

During the trip, Lobivia only came out of the vehicle when she had something to do, and she kept her wings hidden in her knapsack. She had to keep her wings out of sight, so staying with Gerbera and Ayame allowed her to stretch them out. Above all else, she was scared of strangers, so she was more relaxed

this way.

The elves seemed a little suspicious that Gerbera hadn't come out except to poke her head out of the vehicle to greet them, but her beauty worked in her favor in this case. Well, I wasn't sure if it was a good thing. In short, the elves thought Gerbera was "the great savior's sheltered mistress."

It was an unjust suspicion, but it wasn't entirely wrong. I didn't want the misunderstanding to twist our relations with the elves somehow, but it didn't seem to be a problem, so I didn't correct them. Incidentally, Gerbera was genuinely pleased to find out they were treating her as my mistress. Her happiness put me in a good mood too. That said, no matter how the villagers interpreted it, none were rude enough to enter a savior's manamobile without permission, so I could've been needlessly worrying and overthinking things.

On the other hand, nighttime watch became a bit of a problem. Normally, Lily, Rose, and Shiran, all of whom didn't require sleep, stood watch. That would've looked unusual to those who didn't know our circumstances, though, so instead we took shifts with the elves for night watch duty.

Shiran usually patrolled our surroundings in her spare time at night, but since she had to take shifts and pretend to sleep, we had to stop that for the time being. She'd only patrolled to make sure we were absolutely safe, and she'd done so of her own accord, so skipping that step wasn't necessarily a problem.

Our journey went on in this way, and two days after departing Diospyro, we felt a prickling sensation in the air—the unique atmosphere of the Woodlands. The day after that, we arrived at our destination, Rapha, where the elves of the village welcomed Shiran and Kei with open arms.

"Ooh! Lady Shiran! Welcome back!"

"I hear you've become a splendid knight. You were only *this* tall when we last met."

"You're such a fine woman now. I bet men can't leave you alone."

"Lady Kei, you've grown so much."

The elves greeted them with affection, respect, and warmth. The elven villages' chief families turned out knights in great numbers, and it was a knight's

duty to push through the dangerous Woodlands and protect humanity from monsters. As representatives of their villages, knights bore a heavy responsibility, so they were greatly respected.

“You know what, Master? This kinda thing is really nice, huh?” Lily said.

“Yeah, it is.”

I was in complete agreement. I recalled Shiran’s profile back in that underground mausoleum. This was what she’d staked her life to protect. To my eyes, the elven village looked like one big family.

Just then, someone shouted from a short distance away.

“Aaah! You actually came back!”

The speaker was a girl with blonde hair tied low in the back. She looked a little younger than Shiran.

“Helena,” Shiran said, her eye wide.

“What the heck, Shiran?! Why did you come back?!” the girl called Helena yelled as she came toward us.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“She’s Aunt Leah’s granddaughter, Helena,” Shiran answered as her surprise turned to joy. “She’s my old playmate and a good friend.”

“I’m not!” Helena snarled.

“So she says,” I remarked.

“I consider us friends, though,” Shiran said, her smile troubled. “It’s good to see you again, Helena. It’s been five years now, hasn’t it? Have you been doing well?”

“Obviously I am! I’m going to become a knight!” Helena’s unyielding gaze stopped at Shiran’s eyepatch. Her expression turned anxious for just a moment before she began yelling boisterously again. “And what about you?! What’s with that eyepatch?!”

“A lot happened,” Shiran answered, forcing a smile and keeping her expression neutral.

The two of them were definitely friendly, though it seemed Helena burned with a sense of rivalry. The younger elf thrust her finger with so much vigor that I could practically hear some kind of comical sound effect accompanying it.

“Now’s the only time you can act all cool like that! I challenge you, Shiran! I’ll bring you to tears with my— Ow?!”

“You dimwit. You stand before guests. What are you doing?” a man said, dropping his fist on the snarling girl’s head. “Good grief. Could you learn to remain calm?”

The man turned my way and ignored Helena as she squatted to the floor in pain. The other elves were so burly that one would question if they were just villagers, but this man was particularly brawny and stood out prominently among them.

“Welcome to our home, Takahiro, Mana. My name is Melvin. I serve as the village chief here.”

In other words, he was Leah’s husband. Leah, who’d gone to fetch him, was standing by his side. I’d heard from Shiran that despite being unable to form a contract with a spirit, Melvin was an extremely talented fighter. The old scar running deep down his cheek told of the battles he’d fought protecting this village.

“I’ve been told that you came all the way to this remote region after hearing of our plight. I cannot thank you enough, sir. Our village may be a little rustic for saviors, but we will put in our best effort to receive you.”

“Aah, I don’t mind that stuff. Likewise, thank you for allowing us to stay here a short while.”

My greeting with Melvin went off without a hitch, except for the girl who went pale and screamed, “A-A savior?! Wh-What have I done?!” while we were talking, but I decided to leave that to Shiran for later.

Also, I felt it was a good idea to reinforce that we didn’t need some grand reception after our journey. With that in mind, we finished our introductions and I excused myself, asking Leah to guide us to the vacant house they were lending us. After we dropped off our luggage, I headed to the chief’s house with

Lily and Shiran.

“When I was a child, I lived in this village for about half a year,” Shiran said as we walked over. “That’s when I met Helena. She kept me company during sword training quite often. I’ve missed her.”

“When you were a child, huh? What were you like back then?” I asked.

“Hmm... It’s hard to say, seeing as this is about myself, but maybe I was a little like Kei is now. Or not. I think I was a little more childish than her.”

“Hmm. A childish Shiran? I would’ve liked to have seen that.”

As we talked of such things, we arrived at the chief’s house. They treated us to dinner, and after that, I had everyone in the village gather to begin preparations for suppressing the azure hares.

“So, uncle, what’s the situation like?” Shiran asked Melvin.

“Honestly, it’s pretty bad. We’re at the point where we’ve started discussing evacuating the young ones to Kehdo.”

“That bad...”

“I have no intention of abandoning the village, but I don’t think we can hold out. If you’d come just half a month later, our village might’ve been gone already.”

It wasn’t like the other villages could take everyone in. The elves of Rapha had decided to fight to the end to protect the village while they sent as many people as the neighboring villages could accept. It was harsh, but such was reality for the elves living in the Woodlands.

“In that case, we need to be ready to take action as soon as possible,” Shiran concluded.

The operation was to be carried out tomorrow and would take several days. Shiran requested ten or so villagers to help out, which surprised me.

“Hey, Shiran? Can’t we do it on our own?” I asked.

I was worried about the village defenses if we weren’t around. Bringing the villagers who could fight with us meant there would be fewer to protect the

village. That seemed too risky. Azure hares were monsters from the Fringes. If they were among the weaker monsters there, we could defeat them all on our own.

Shiran shook her head. “No. They’re a necessary force.”

“What do you mean?”

“We cannot simply hunt monsters blindly during breeding season.”

I cocked my head, so Shiran went into further detail.

“When there are too many monsters inhabiting a certain region, the tumult of battle can attract other monsters. They’ll come one after the other, and if we don’t deal with them quickly, they’ll get out of hand like a tumbling snowball.”

“Meaning we have to control our pace?”

“Now that I think of it, Senpai...” Katou said. She’d sat quietly by Rose’s side during the strategy meeting. “Something similar happened right after we came to this world. When the cheaters started exploring the forest, monsters kept appearing in droves, and even dozens of cheaters could no longer hold them back, I think.”

“Aah. That was before the exploration team was formed, right? I heard that too. They said Nakajima Kojirou, the guy who ended up as the exploration team’s leader, took charge and somehow rallied everyone together.”

That incident, which nearly led to our immediate annihilation, had instead led to the founding of the exploration team. That was a bit of a digression, though. The important thing to note was that a swarm of monsters could become a threat that even cheaters couldn’t hold out against. So what was to be done?

Everyone turned to Shiran as she held up a finger.

“There are two methods,” she began. “The first is to strike with a large enough army that a swarm of enemies won’t be a problem. The vanguard pins down the monsters while the rearguard crushes them with a rain of arrows and magic. It’s a brute-force approach, but very reliable.”

“If there are a lot of enemies to deal with, just increase your capacity to deal with them, you mean.”

Shiran nodded. "That's the idea, but we can't use this method."

"Figures."

The only time it would work was when one could prepare the necessary force to manage it. Artlessly gathering numbers would just make one stand out more and cause the monsters to swarm faster, making it easier to get wiped out. Aker's soldiers and knights hadn't made a move, despite knowing of the situation, precisely because they couldn't gather the necessary force right now. As for us, we were just over ten people, including the elves who were coming with us. We had nowhere near the required numbers to use this method.

"So we'll use the second method," Shiran said, holding up another finger. "We target the stragglers that stray from the herd and chip away at their numbers. The important part is to rapidly defeat the strays and retreat before the herd notices."

"Without their noticing... So skill is more important than numbers?" I asked.

"Yes. In this case, bringing more people will actually make it harder to move about stealthily. Azure hares live in colonies burrowed underground. When they go to get food, small packs break off from the herd. We can carry out the suppression with only a few elites who can eliminate these packs immediately, along with a minimal amount of support in case some get by."

"An elite force of the select few, huh? Do you think we can do it?"

"With the elves' support, it's more than possible."

"Hmm."

If Shiran could declare that so easily, it meant she was confident. I decided to trust her on this and moved on to another question.

"That means we won't enter the azure hares' breeding grounds. Won't this approach take a lot of time?"

"Yes. Azure hares dig their burrows over a wide area, so we have to chip away at their numbers little by little from the outer edges."

"Is it okay to go so slowly?"

Shiran nodded. "We'll prioritize safety. Besides, there's no need to completely

exterminate them. That's for the order and the army to do. Fortunately, azure hares aren't active over that large of an area. We can stave off any immediate danger by culling the herds closest to the village. If we can buy time, Aker's forces will begin moving in once they're done with the ruby bears. Conversely, we can't rush in there thoughtlessly just because we're trying to be efficient. At most, we should proceed carefully."

The elves of the village looked perplexed by this. They were probably expecting a more drastic improvement now that saviors were here. They obviously thought Shiran was being too cautious. However, the chief and his wife spoke up.

"Very well, Shiran. We will do as you say. As the lieutenant of the Third Company that fought at Fort Tilia, you know far more than the rest of us when it comes to suppressing monsters."

"That's right. This is no place for amateurs like us to object."

With Melvin and Leah's endorsement, everyone else agreed. Their timing was perfect; it stopped the elves' bewilderment from changing to dissatisfaction.

To push things a little more, Leah asked me—or rather, asked a savior—for confirmation.

"Now then. Will this work for you too, sir?"

She really was shrewd. I could read her intention, so I nodded right away.

"I have no objections. There's no doubting this plan, seeing that it comes from Shiran."

"That decides it, then, Shiran. You may do as you please," Leah said.

"Thank you very much," Shiran said, smiling. "Please be at ease. This is the method saviors use to conquer the Dark Woods."

"Is that so?" I asked, a little interested by that fact.

"Yes. Many monsters inhabit the Dark Woods, a restricted region. Even with the tremendous power of a savior, there are too many to handle. It's the same as our situation. This is one reason why the knights of the Holy Order always accompany saviors."

“I see.”

Meaning the villagers coming with us would be fulfilling the role normally meant for the Holy Order. The scale was a little smaller, but the task was the same.

“So what do we do, specifically?” I asked.

“First, we search for strays that have separated from the herd. Please leave this part to my spirit.”

Shiran quickly glanced at Lily. She couldn't mention it now, but she was conveying that she would be relying on Lily's nose too. Lily gave her a wink, indicating to leave it to her.

“Also, since you have a spirit too, auntie, I was hoping you would help.”

“Sure,” Leah replied. “Leave it to me.”

“What should I do?” Melvin asked.

“Protect the village. We'll be helpless if we have nowhere to return to,” Shiran explained.

“Mrgh... I suppose I have no choice.”

The chief and his wife couldn't possibly both leave the village at the same time.

Leah gave her husband a slap on the shoulder, then turned to the other villagers. “That will do for us. So what will those participating in the operation do? You said you wanted to pick out those who specialize in archery, so that's who we've gathered here.”

“They will intercept any enemies coming in from our surroundings,” Shiran answered. “They are a spare force serving as a rearguard, but it's an extremely important role in case the worst should happen. Please remain focused.”

“This is a threat to our home. None here are foolish enough to let their mind wander.”

Leah accepted for them, and the other elves straightened their posture. This operation held the fate of their entire village in its hand. They were fired up to

give it their all.

Seeing their reliable response, Shiran continued.

“As for the main force, I’d like only those skilled in battle,” she said, turning our way. “Lily, Rose, and Takahiro, could I ask this of you?”

“Me...?” I didn’t expect to be named, so I was a little surprised.

“Yes. I would like to take the front myself...but my wounds from Fort Tilia still haven’t fully healed.”

That was how Shiran explained it to the elves, but in truth, it was more about the effects of turning into a demilich. According to her, she was worried that her poorly balanced body would affect her fighting abilities over a series of battles. She’d already talked to me before about avoiding direct engagement during this operation.

That said, I never expected to be selected. I’d thought that I’d be part of the rearguard. Perhaps I was being added to the vanguard for appearances’ sake to raise the villagers’ morale, being a savior and all. It made sense if all the actual combat would be left to Lily and Rose.

Shiran seemed to have read my thoughts. She shook her head and gave me a beautiful smile. “You’re strong, Takahiro. Even among knights, it’s very rare to find a man of valor capable of taking on seven dragons at once.”

“Well...”

Not only had I caught them by surprise thanks to Gerbera, but I’d even had help from Asarina and Salvia at the time. That wasn’t my own strength. Not that I could possibly say that here, so I kept silent. I could hear the villagers whispering, “Seven dragons?” to each other. I’d already lost my chance to make up any excuses.

“You always underestimate yourself, Takahiro. It’s one of your faults,” Shiran added, grinning as I protested with my eyes.

“You say that...but isn’t vanguard duty extremely important for this operation?”

“Yes, it is, and I’m saying you’re suitable for the job. As you are now, you can

fight side by side with Lily and Rose.”

“Side by side...”

Those words pricked at my heart more than I thought they would. I hadn’t forgotten those days when I was a weakling who didn’t amount to more than a burden.

“As your swordsmanship instructor, and as the former lieutenant of the Third Company, you have my guarantee. Have some confidence. You can do it.”

“Shiran...”

I couldn’t back down when she put it like that. I accepted my fate and nodded.

“Got it, Instructor. I’ll do it.”

Chapter 6: The Azure Hare Suppression

The next day, we pushed our way through the forest to begin suppressing the azure hares. Participating were myself, Lily, Rose, Shiran, Kei, Leah, and ten elves from Rapha who specialized in archery. Incidentally, Shiran's childhood friend Helena was absent. She was somewhat capable with a sword, but not all that great with a bow.

Leah and the other elves guided us through the forest. We proceeded carefully as Shiran and Leah searched for enemies while Lily secretly added her nose to the effort.

"We should be coming up on them soon. Are you ready?" Shiran asked the three of us.

"Yeah."

"Yup."

"Not a problem."

Once we got close to our targets, the rest was up to the vanguard. Lily acted as lead scout as we closed the remaining distance with all due caution.

"Found them..." Lily said, keeping her voice down.

She pointed into the distance where we could see some azure hares. They were forty-centimeter-tall rabbits. Their olive brown fur was dotted with ragged blue stones, giving them a grotesque appearance.

There were four of them. Lily shot me a glance. I nodded, then dashed forth with Rose. At the same time, Lily's mana built up behind us. The azure hares twitched. They'd sensed Lily's mana, but it was too late. Her magic had already activated.

It was wind magic in the form of countless blades. She gave them no time to run away. A violent gale blew in, and shrieks filled the air with splashes of blood. Our preemptive attack had gone exactly as planned, but it wasn't over

yet.

Lily had focused on firing her magic as fast as possible, so it had only been grade 2. What's more, she'd widened the area of effect to hit multiple targets, which had weakened the magic a little. An azure hare's durability matched its small stature, yet not one had suffered a fatal wound. The wind died down, and the monsters regained their footing. Animosity flared in their eyes, but right before they could actually do anything, Rose and I struck.

"Oooh!"

"Hyaah!"

Lily's magic had only been a diversion. Its goal was to buy time and create an opening so that we could close in and strike while they were off balance. Our true attack was still to come. The nature of our strategy required that we keep combat to a minimum and defeat our enemies in a single blow whenever possible. As we were now, we were strong enough to do that.

A sword flashed, and an ax howled. My blade decapitated an azure hare, while Rose's hardy blow split one clean in two, blue stones and all. That left two more.

Naturally, our enemies didn't just sit still and let themselves be killed. The two azure hares leapt back to get away, then turned their snouts at me and Rose respectively. In the next instant, the blue stones embedded in their bodies were glowing. Glyphs took shape, and grade 1 water magic activated, sending a water bullet soaring through the air at my face.

"G-Gh!"

I thrust my shield in front of me. I felt an impact along my left arm and heard a dull thud. The hit bent me backward, so I endured by twisting my waist and thrusting my right hand to the ground. The water bullet dispersed over my shield. I'd managed to withstand the attack, but now that I'd stopped my advance to defend myself, the azure hare was trying to take the opportunity to leap even farther away. However, in the next instant, a fist-sized rock smashed into its snout.

"Got it..."

The hand I had on the ground was equipped with Rose's specially made Asarina Bracer. By channeling mana into the imitation earth runestone on it, I could fire rocks out of the ground. The azure hare I hit flipped over in the air, and I lunged forward to strike the vulnerable monster.

I immediately stopped, though. Rose had charged ahead of me and swung her ax. The other azure hare had tried to attack her earlier, and it was now dead. I'd seen it happen in the corner of my sight. When the monster fired a water bullet at her, Rose had ferociously swung her bardiche in a vertical stroke, cutting the projectile right out of the air. Then she'd moved to intercept both monsters in a flash. It was a dazzling display of valorous skill.



Rose could strike down any resistance head-on and charge in with astounding ability. She'd acquired these techniques thanks to Shiran's guidance. Even if Rose wasn't improving at Lily's pace, she was growing steadily. I'd gotten to where I could put up a good fight during our sparring sessions, but I was still far weaker than her in actual combat.

"Forgive me for acting impetuously," Rose said, swinging the blood off her bardiche and walking my way.

"It's fine. We needed to finish them off definitively. I'd expect nothing less of you, Rose."

"Likewise, Master. That was a magnificent display," she said with all sincerity, her eyes directed at the bracer on my hand. A gentle atmosphere enveloped us. "It seems you've mastered the use of the equipment I made for you."

Her expression didn't change much, but I could tell she was in a great mood. She was happy that the magic tool she'd made was useful. Rose's pureness could be ever so adorable.

I gazed at her reserved smile, when suddenly, Rose noticed something.

"Oh? Master, your face..."

"Hm? Oh."

I touched my cheek and felt a lukewarm wetness. A spray of blood had apparently splashed against me.

"Ah. Don't. I shall wipe it off for you, so please don't move," Rose said, pulling a handkerchief from her apron's front pocket and nimbly wiping my cheek.

"Your hand, please."

"Sure."

Next, she wiped each of my fingers one by one, cleaning the blood I'd gotten on them from touching my cheek. Her meticulous work tickled a bit.

Once she was done, Lily called out in a half-teasing tone, "Come on, Master, Rose. Quit flirting. It's time to withdraw."

"Right. Let's go," I replied.

Lily was probably just trying to ease the tension from the aftermath of battle by joking around. It was a little embarrassing, but I was grateful for her consideration. However, the overly serious and awkward Rose took Lily's words at face value.

"S-Sister! I-I wasn't flirting!"

"Yeah, yeah, come on."

Lily laughed and brushed off Rose's protests. There was something suggestive about her smile, which made me a little curious.

"Hee hee. It's okay to flirt, right?" she added.

"S-Sister..."

Rose stole a glance at me. She'd looked so heroic moments ago, but now she was restlessly fidgeting with her skirt. It was starting to make me feel a little weird. I casually averted my gaze and met Lily's eyes.

I could tell she was in a good mood from her enormous grin. I was still curious, but withdrawing was our priority right now. We kept our hands moving as we talked and retrieved the dead azure hares. Their meat was edible, and the blue stones on their bodies could be refined into pigments for dyes. Once we were done, we quickly left the scene.



After reuniting with the elves, we distanced ourselves a little from the azure hares' breeding grounds and took a break.

"Takahiro. Here, have some water."

Once I sat down, Kei brought me a canteen.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Good work out there," she said, smiling gently. "It seems to be going well."

"Yeah. I was a little worried when Shiran proposed I take part, so I'm glad I can actually keep up."

"I wasn't worried at all," Kei said, giggling innocently. "I believe she left it to

you because she trusts your strength.”

“Is that so? I’ll have to do my best to meet her expectations, then,” I replied with a smile of my own. “Watch my back, okay?”

“Of course.”

The way Kei clenched her fists was charming in its youthfulness. However, in contrast to her cute appearance, she was one of the stronger members of the group when it came to combat. As a squire for the Alliance Knights, she was on par with an average villager, and she’d also been sparring with Lobivia lately, so her skills were remarkable. Therefore, trusting her to watch my back wasn’t merely tokenistic.

“Please excuse me, then,” Kei said with a quick bow, then returned to where the other elves were resting.

Kei spoke with me as she always did, but the villagers were a little distant, as if they were overawed. It was unfortunate, but given my position, there wasn’t much that I could do about it. I hoped that working together like this would help them open up a little.

As I thought about the situation, I took a swig of water from the canteen Kei had brought me. It had just the slightest apple-like taste to it. A small amount of cider had apparently been mixed in to give it some flavor. It had also been cooled with magic, making it quite refreshing.

I’d heard during dinner the previous evening that reclamation villages in this area often nurtured a rare type of fruit tree that grew in the Woodlands. That was where nasis came from, the fruit used in the sweets we’d gotten in Diospyro. They were sometimes transported to town and eaten as is, and sometimes they were sent all the way to the Empire in the form of cider. They weren’t in season right now, but we would get the chance to try some raw nasis in the future.

I finished quenching my thirst and let out a satisfied sigh.

Today was the fourth day of our efforts to suppress the azure hares. The plan was proceeding smoothly. In accordance with Shiran’s proposal, we repeatedly

searched for safe openings to carry out our task and took plenty of breaks. Though we'd been going at a very careful pace, we'd still managed to take down somewhere around a hundred azure hares so far.

This was but a fraction of the entire herd, of course, but it was enough to push back a fair portion that had been overflowing toward the village. We'd actually accomplished all that was necessary yesterday. Any farther and we would have to enter the regions crowded with burrows, so our operation was scheduled to end today. Still, we had to remain vigilant until the very end.

Just as I fired myself up for this, someone called out to me.

"Good work out there, sir," Leah said, walking my way with her spirit by her side. "Shiran has gone out for reconnaissance, so I came to inform you."

"Got it. Is there something I can do?"

"Please just get some rest," Leah answered, smiling bitterly. "Unlike us, you've been fighting the azure hares directly. You must be tired."

During this operation, Shiran had been scouting for any azure hares that we could attack. Her spirit's ability to detect things in general had some limitations, but when it came to simply detecting enemies, it was tremendously helpful. Also, even though Shiran had some problems with her body, she could still fight around Rose's level, meaning she could act independently in the Woodlands.

Even though Shiran had decided not to participate in battle unless necessary—largely due to the deterioration of her abilities and her concerns with fighting a series of battles—she was doing more than enough on every other front. It was certainly impressive. Taking that into account, I couldn't possibly answer that this was hard on me.

"I'm fine, so please take care of yourselves," I said, grateful for Leah's consideration. However, if pushed to say it, having lived in the Woodlands for a while myself, I was more worried about the villagers. "Just stepping foot in the Woodlands saps the spirit. If you're feeling unwell, then please tell me right a... What's wrong?"

"Oh. It's nothing. I was just thinking that you're exactly as Shiran and Kei described," Leah said, putting her hand to her mouth and laughing.

I scratched my cheek awkwardly. “What did they say? Nothing bad, I hope.”

“Perish the thought. They praised you as a strong and kind man.”

“I’m always the one needing help, though...” I said, smiling bitterly.

Leah shook her head. “That’s not true. At the very least, those two don’t think so. Kei admires you, sir. She told me that the way you work to protect what is dear to you is dazzling. I believe that has had a positive influence on her.”

She looked off deep into the grove of trees.

“The same goes for Shiran,” she added. “I never thought she would meet the savior she was meant to devote her sword to.”

“Devote her sword...?”

I thought I’d heard that phrase somewhere before. I dug through my memories, and then I remembered. It was during our stay in that reclamation village close to Fort Tilia.

“Takahiro, do you know what manner of existence we knights are?”

That was what the commander had asked me at the inn.

“We devote our swords purely to the ideals of justice and the salvation of the weak. In a sense, we are much like the saviors who descend upon this world... There are those who prioritize fame, those who are corrupt, and recently, I’ve heard there are even those who are simply bloodthirsty for battle. Shiran is different from them, however. She is a knight. I’d like you to keep that in mind, Takahiro.”

Her face had been scarily serious at the time.

“Please continue to take care of Shiran, Takahiro.”

I remembered the commander’s faith in me...and I remembered my bewilderment.

There was no need to verify this after all this time. Shiran was a noble knight. She had unwavering conviction, and she kept her focus fixed on what she aspired to be. Her pride as a knight was a firm core that kept her standing strong.

The only time Shiran had ever shown weakness was when the commander was arrested, and even then, she had recovered soon after. Was there really anything I could do to help a girl like that? I wasn't even a savior to begin with.

I was neither hero nor monster. Not that Leah had any way of knowing this, but I wasn't worthy of such devotion. Still, that didn't mean I'd forgotten what the commander had told me. Even if I wasn't a savior, it didn't change the fact that Shiran was my companion and precious to me.

"Oh?" Leah muttered, her body twitching a little. "It seems Shiran has returned."

As a spiritualist much like Shiran, Leah had been keeping an eye on our surroundings while Shiran was away. A moment later, Shiran appeared.

"I found our next target. Please mobilize."

With that, we immediately got to our feet.

Chapter 7: Accident

Shiran had gone out of her way to find targets for us, so we couldn't let this opportunity pass by because we were too slow to act. We followed her guidance and quickly got moving. Fortunately, our targets hadn't strayed much from where Shiran had discovered them.

"Lily, please take care of things from here," Shiran said.

"Got it."

Lily nodded and took the lead. Rose and I followed behind her, distancing ourselves from the elves. Far in front of us, we discerned three azure hares. There were fewer than last time. It didn't seem like we'd have any problems taking them out.

Just as always, Lily shot a glance our way.

Just as always, I nodded and dashed forward with Rose.

Just as always, the suppression was going smoothly.

But this was the Woodlands. One never knew what could happen given even a single second in this den of evil. Right as I sensed Lily's mana building up behind me, when the azure hares noticed us...

"What?!"

Leah's panicked voice struck my ears. I turned around on reflex, but I couldn't see well through the trees. I could spot a few of the elves, but not Leah herself. Still, her voice reached me.

"A-Another monster?!"

That was enough for me to understand the situation. Leah had the ability to detect enemies using a spirit, and she'd sensed another monster approaching, independent of our targets.

I could feel the panic spreading among the elves. The abrupt event made them restless. According to our strategy meeting, we were to avoid unforeseen

encounters with monsters as much as possible, and if not for the horrible timing, we would've withdrawn with all haste. We'd actually done so multiple times over the last four days.

But this time, that wouldn't fly. The azure hares we'd marked as our targets already knew we were here. If we ran, they would naturally give chase. We'd inevitably slowed down because of the sudden turn of events, so we couldn't avoid battle.

In that case, we would have to engage the other incoming enemy at the same time. We could possibly take them all out, but it was likely we'd suffer casualties among the elves. That was to say nothing of attracting even more monsters if we moved too slow.

I managed to process all this in an instant because I'd considered the possibility already. We'd prepared for this, so we shouldn't have any problems dealing with it.

"Keep going, Lily!" I yelled.

"Do not falter! Ready your bows!"

My voice overlapped with Shiran's orders. We were addressing different people, but our judgments had been the same. The vanguard was to continue attacking our targets while the rearguard pinned down the incoming monster and bought time. With that, we could quickly exterminate the azure hares and return to the group. We'd expected an accidental event like this, and believed that we had the ability to overcome it. So long as we kept our cool, we could handle it. At the very least, this development didn't bother Lily, Rose, or Shiran.

"Roger that!"

Lily promptly activated her wind magic. The gale stopped the azure hares in their tracks. Rose and I charged in without hesitation and smoothly struck down an enemy each. The remaining hare activated magic of its own, aiming for Rose. Once I confirmed this, I turned on my heel. Rose could defeat the remaining azure hare by herself, so it was more prudent for me to head back to the elves.

Lily had also come to the same conclusion. We ran toward the elves and caught sight of their backs. It hadn't even been ten seconds, but the new enemy

had already appeared. Beyond the elves, I saw an injured azure hare smash through the thickets, and behind it was an enormous bear covered in red fur.

“Graaawr!”

The bear roared as crimson flames burst from its body. It was my first time seeing one, but it was definitely a ruby bear, the monster we’d heard about whose numbers were damaging the region. We’d apparently come across one that had been hunting azure hares itself. No matter how careful we were, accidents could still happen. However, it was precisely because we were careful that we could cope with such incidents.

“Loose!”

At Shiran’s command, the elves loosed their arrows as one. The barrage rained down on the three azure hares ahead of the bear, slowing them down. One beat later, Kei deployed a glyph.

“Here I go!”

She calmly aimed and fired an ice spear, splendidly piercing the chest of the azure hare that had been struck by the most arrows. In that time, Lily reached the elves.

“Please take over, Lily!”

Leaving things here to us, Shiran charged the enemy. Her target was the ruby bear. They were known as the most powerful monsters in this region, so she knew that the villagers would be in danger if it got too close. Shiran challenged the enormous beast head-on as she slowed its momentum with water magic.

Meanwhile, the remaining azure hares marked the elves as their enemies. They fired water bullets, but Lily moved in to intercept with her black spear.

“Yaaah!”

The wind magic wreathed around the tip of her weapon easily shattered the two bullets.

“You won’t get past me!”

Lily twirled her favorite spear, the haft whistling through the air. It wasn’t like the monsters could understand her, but they could still read her intent. The two

hares decided to keep their distance from her. That was when I charged in.

“Ooooh!”

We couldn’t waste any time. We had to eliminate these enemies as quickly as possible. Fortunately, with Lily guarding them, there was no need to worry about the elves’ safety. I could concentrate entirely on the enemies before me.

Realizing that I was closing in on their flank, the closest azure hare leapt to try and escape my attack, but I could still reach it. I stepped in deep and lowered my stance, then sprang up with an upward slash. The tip of my blade split its torso. That was one down.

“Gh?!”

Immediately after, the other azure hare attacked me. It was aiming for the opening I’d presented when striking. The blue stones in its body glowed, and a water bullet took shape at point-blank range. I didn’t have time to pull my sword back, so I had no choice but to defend. At this range, if I took a shot to my shield, it would knock me off balance. That could lead to a follow-up attack I wouldn’t be able to block.

“Oooh!”

I knew this, so daringly took a step forward. At the same time, I swung my shield-bearing arm. Then, for one instant, I unleashed my mana at full throttle. I drew up the power deep within me that I’d attained in the life-and-death struggle against the Mad Beast. A torrent of mana ran through my left arm with so much force that had someone else of my level tried it, they wouldn’t have been able to withstand it. By doing so, I manifested the Great White Spider’s tyranny.

“Haaah!”

I forced the power, which seemed like it could tear my body apart from the inside out, under control and slammed my shield into the enemy. The water bullet struck my shield and broke apart like a harmless droplet. The azure hare on the other side fell with no resistance. Everything was over with a single blow.

Having smashed all in its path, my left arm came to a stop.

“Phew...”

I let out a long sigh, straightened myself back up, and checked for injuries. When I’d last used this power, it pretty much exhausted all of my stamina and mana. This time wasn’t so bad. Because of my training, I could now use the Great White Spider’s tyranny for a single instant, making it a practical battle tactic.

Regardless, I still grimaced, though for an entirely different reason. I’d used about a third of Gerbera’s monstrous strength. With Asarina’s assistance, it was closer to two thirds. This was my current limit. A throbbing pain also crept up my left arm. I couldn’t use it multiple times in the middle of a fight like this. It was better now that it didn’t take me out of things entirely, but I would need to consider how and when to use it.

In any case, after I quickly confirmed that I was okay, I looked over to the remaining battle. The fight between Shiran and the ruby bear was just about over.

“Graaawr!”

The ruby bear was now covered in wounds, all of which had occurred during the short time I hadn’t been watching.

“Haaah!”

In contrast, Shiran was unscathed. Even now, she easily blocked the powerful arm bearing down on her with her shield. She had enough skill and raw strength to take on a bear attack without budging an inch. A ruby bear was supposed to be able to utterly crush its enemies with just the tip of its paw, but with Shiran’s power, its unreasonable superhuman strength meant nothing. Still, that wasn’t all there was to a ruby bear.

The truly troublesome part of dealing with one was that flames blazing from its fur would burn any nearby enemies. However, it couldn’t use that ability properly right now because a veil of water was wrapped around the fire it emitted, keeping it suppressed.

The water veil was a type of debilitation magic meant specifically for fire monsters. I’d heard of it before, but this was my first time seeing it. Once cast,

the user couldn't use any other magic while its effects were active. If a mage couldn't use any other magic, they couldn't do anything else to a weakened enemy. A swordsman could use this tactic along with their sword, but a portion of their attention had to remain focused on something other than fighting the enemy.

There weren't that many people who could use magic to begin with, so with all its limitations, very few people bothered with learning debilitation magic.

In this case, Leah's contracted spirit was the one using it. A spirit could perform any magic its contractor could, so despite its limited applications, debilitation magic was more than adequate in this situation.

"Haaah!"

No longer able to resist, the ruby bear could do nothing as Shiran thrust her sword into its throat. The blade went clean through its thick muscles, severing the beast's life in an instant. Blood spurted from its wound, spraying over Shiran's head. That was the last vain struggle the ruby bear could offer. Its enormous body fell back with a thud, spraying blood all the while.

A cheer broke out among the elves. I'd readied myself to step in and help if needed, but after I made sure it was over, I lowered my sword and sighed in relief. Things had gotten a little frightening there, but it all ended without any injuries. We managed to get through it safely.

"Master."

Judging that there was no more danger, Lily jogged up to me, away from the elves she'd been protecting. Rose was also behind her.

"Are you hurt?" Lily asked.

"I'm fine."

I nearly relaxed, but then I remembered we were still in the Woodlands. I made sure to remain vigilant as I continued.

"My arm just hurts a little... Oh, you can heal me later." Just as Lily started using healing magic, I told her not to worry about it, then gave out my orders. "Are both of you okay? Good, let's withdraw then."

This battle had lasted twice as long as any of our previous fights, and we'd made quite a bit of noise. If we stayed too long, a swarm might show up. We'd managed up until now with little danger because we'd only been acting from an advantageous position with energy to spare, and that was the reason we'd been able to deal with this unexpected situation. We had to remain cautious. We couldn't forget that.

"I don't think we can bring the ruby bear's corpse with us..." I said. "You two retrieve the azure hares."

"Roger that."

"Very well."

Lily and Rose knew what to do next. Now for the elves. It would be better for Shiran to give them orders rather than me. With that in mind, I turned toward her, then raised an eyebrow. After splendidly defeating the ruby bear, she hadn't budged at all.

"Shiran?"

Was something wrong? Her characteristic white armor was dyed red, but that was only because she'd gotten sprayed by the ruby bear's blood. She didn't have any injuries that I knew of, yet she wasn't moving. Her eye was fixed on the sword in her hand. The other elves also started to realize something was amiss.

As we all watched, Shiran started swaying unsteadily.

"Shiran?!"

Her sword tumbled to the ground as she fell to her knees.

"Wh-What's wrong?!"

The elves shouted in panic as I ran up to Shiran in a fluster. My feet made sticky splashing noises on the blood-soaked ground. The smell of blood was so thick it could trigger vomiting, and it was combined with an animal stench. I ignored all of this and supported Shiran's shoulders.

"Takahiro..."

Her voice had a delirious ring to it. I could tell that wasn't all, though. I looked

at Shiran's face to see how she was, then felt a chill run down my spine.

"Taka...hiro..."

It wasn't like anything really happened. Shiran's single blue eye merely reflected my image. She wasn't glaring or anything. She actually looked more as though she was in a daze. And yet I froze up as if something unthinkable was before me. I didn't know the reason for it. I couldn't explain it in any other way than that my body had reacted on instinct. I remained frozen like this for several seconds.

"No... It's nothing, Takahiro."

Shiran's voice struck my ear, suddenly bringing me back to my senses. Her expression now looked dignified.

"I'm sorry for worrying you."

Her voice was steady again. This was the usual Shiran. That strange feeling was gone as if it hadn't been there at all.

"Aah, this is...a little unpleasant," Shiran muttered, looking down at her body covered in blood. "Could you step back, Takahiro? You'll get wet."

A glyph formed in her hand, and a ball of water took shape above her head. I stood there in a daze, but one beat later, I took a step back. At the same time, the water fell.

Water splashed over Shiran's head and spread across the ground. Even if it didn't wash away the blood staining her clothes, it still washed off the majority on her armor. This weakened the thick odor in the air a bit.

"That's better," Shiran said, shaking some water off her head and standing back up.

Her movements were as steady as always. I continued staring at her, feeling like I'd been bewitched. Just then, Leah stumbled over, a pale Kei by her side.

"A-Are you all right, Shiran?" Leah asked.

"Shiran!"

"Auntie, Kei... Yes, I'm fine," Shiran insisted, turning to them with a wry smile.

"I just felt a little sick from the stench of blood."

"A-Are you sure?" Kei asked in bewilderment.

"Sorry for worrying you," Shiran said as she bowed.

"It's fine. There's no need for that," Leah replied, a huge smile on her face.

"Aah, thank goodness. I thought my heart was going to stop."

She looked truly relieved, but I just couldn't feel the same. I stared at Shiran as she reached for her fallen sword. Was she pushing herself too far? Nothing about her seemed to suggest that, though.

"Are you really okay?" I asked.

"Yes. It's just as I said," she answered, acting the same as always. "Let's move, Takahiro. We must prepare ourselves for our next target."

There was nothing wrong with her proposal either, but...

"No. Let's call it a day," I told her, shaking my head.

"Takahiro? If this is about my condition, I really am fine."

"No. It's better we stop if there is even the tiniest thing to be worried about," I said, then turned to Leah. "We completed a good portion of our original objective already. I don't think there's any need to push ourselves further. How about it?"

"That's...certainly true."

Leah hesitated for a moment, but because of my strong tone, she quickly nodded.

Having gained the consent of the villagers' representative, I looked back to Shiran.

"Takahiro..."

She protested with her eye, but I shook my head again.

"With what just happened, we might be more exhausted than we think. We should call it a day."

"Very well..." Shiran murmured as she lowered her gaze. She could see that I

had no intention of backing down. “Let us return to the village.”



“Was I too overbearing?” I quietly muttered.

We were back in the house we were borrowing during our stay in the village. We’d returned earlier than planned, so I’d given the ones who’d stayed behind a brief explanation of what had happened.

I was sitting cross-legged, and Ayame was lying in my lap, snoring. Asarina, who also had to stay cramped up and hidden while we were outside, was enjoying freedom in her own way. She loosely coiled around my left arm and sat her Venus-flytrap-like head on my shoulder, asking me to play with her. I was humoring her when Lobivia, who kept stealing glances at Asarina and Ayame, curiously spoke up.

“But, Takahiro, Shiran looked kinda sick, yeah?” she asked, tugging on the hem of my clothes. “You weren’t really wrong or nothing.”

“I agree,” Gerbera added. She was nestled up at my side as I leaned back on one of her legs. “There was that issue Lily brought up a little while ago... Remember? About the nighttime patrols. Shiran has a habit of pushing herself too much. Sometimes you have to be somewhat overbearing to get her to stop.” Gerbera paused there, looking a little baffled. “Actually, isn’t that why you cut things short and returned?”

“That’s true...” I said with an ambiguous nod.

Lobivia and Gerbera were right. There wasn’t much I could do for Shiran. She was a noble knight, reliable to the core. Pushing herself too hard was the one and only flaw among her many virtues.

Worrying about her was about all I could do. That was why I’d decided to do so as much as possible. That was how I’d acted until today and how I would continue to act in the future.

I was doing what I could. At least, that was supposed to be the case. So why did I feel a strange lingering discomfort deep in my chest? Something about this made me feel like I was mistaking one thing for another.

I recalled the inexplicable sensation I'd felt when I looked at Shiran's face while she was kneeling on the ground. I couldn't get it out of my mind. Why had I ended today's activities to begin with? It wasn't because I'd thought that Shiran had pushed herself too hard. I'd spoken before I'd even considered that. My mouth had moved on instinct, telling me I had to do so. That was the reason I'd been so overbearing. I'd felt more danger than consideration. Still, I couldn't identify why that was. I could do nothing but linger over this hazy sensation.

What exactly was it? I would come to understand that evening, when I discovered Shiran after she'd slipped out of her house.

Chapter 8: Cultural Exchange with the Villagers

I took a stroll through the village with Lily. There was a time when we couldn't go on a walk on our own, seeing as how we couldn't understand the local language. But now, Rose could make imitation translation runestones, so we had no problem striking up a conversation with anyone we ran into.

We were leisurely taking in the scenery when we suddenly heard someone yelling.

"I challenge you! Let's see your strength!"

The voice was familiar. We headed toward it, where we found Helena detaining Shiran. Shiran looked just the slightest bit uncomfortable. In contrast, Helena looked a little desperate.

"Oh, Takahiro." Kei, who stood next to them looking somewhat flustered, spotted us with her keen eyes and ran over. "Do you need something?"

"No, not really. We were taking a walk and heard a bit of a fuss, so we came to check it out. What's going on over there?"

"Pretty much exactly what it sounds like," Kei replied, forcing a smile. "Helena wants Shiran to pay attention to her."

"Aah. So it's like that..."

"She wasn't chosen for the suppression operation, and we plan to leave the village tomorrow, so she thinks now is the only time. Helena wants Shiran to acknowledge her, after all."

While Kei explained the situation, my eyes met Shiran's. Her troubled expression, half-hidden by her eyepatch, turned to one of realization.

"Very well, Helena. Then how about this?" Shiran said. "Just as I mentioned before, I cannot overexert myself too much right now. That being the case, would you like to have a mock battle with the person I nominate to take my place?"

“A proxy, you mean?” Helena asked.

“Yes. If you win, I shall admit defeat. If you lose, I’ll provide some advice. How about it?”

“Fine,” she said after a few seconds of silent thought.

Helena was being surprisingly agreeable. Maybe she just felt she had no choice but to back down, knowing full well how unreasonable she was being.

“So? Who am I fighting?” Helena asked, her provocative attitude still intact.

Shiran smiled, then turned my way. “Takahiro, may I ask this of you?”

“I don’t mind,” I answered.

Shiran had a hopeful look in her eye, so I nodded along, not really surprised by this development. I couldn’t read her intentions, but I trusted her. I was sure nothing bad would come of it, so there was no need to worry. Helena, on the other hand, was shocked to the core.

“Y-You want me to go at it with the esteemed savior?!”

She turned white as a sheet. Actually, it seemed she hadn’t even known I was here until now. She was panicking, quite spectacularly I might add.

“What if he gets injured or something? That would be pretty serious,” she continued in a fluster. “Sh-Shiran! A-Are you maybe trying to get me summarily executed?”

“No, not at all,” Shiran said, shaking her head. “In any case, you say that, but Takahiro is rather strong. You seem pretty sure of yourself if you think you can injure him.”

“Th-Th-Th-That’s not what I mean!”

Perhaps believing that her statement had also been very rude, Helena’s expression stiffened more and more each second. Shiran had no ill intent whatsoever, so Helena was really just digging her own grave. I couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for her.

“It’s okay, Helena. Takahiro won’t execute you,” Kei said. “I mean, I’ve also trained with him.”

Kei was probably trying to be supportive, but Helena seemed to be at the end of her rope, which just made her lash out at Kei.

“Isn’t that because you’re his mistress?!”

“M-Mis—?!”

In the blink of an eye, Kei’s cheeks turned red as a rose. This scene was familiar by now. By some twist of fate, that misunderstanding had followed her here. This was the first I’d heard of it, though.

“Wh-Who’s been saying such things?!” Kei screamed.

“Everyone! Everyone’s talking about it! I heard it loud and clear!”

“Wh-When did that happen...?”

Kei looked around, her face still bright red, and all the elves in the area averted their eyes at once.

“Well...you’ve been so intimate with the savior, Lady Kei,” one of them said.

“Everyone’s been saying that having such a relationship with a great savior is something worth celebrating. Are we wrong?” another added.

Now that I thought of it, Kei and I must have looked extremely close to any outsiders. At the very least, we didn’t look like a savior and his attendant. The villagers’ hopes were likely a large part of it, but it was understandable that they’d come to that conclusion.

“Y-You’re wrong! I-I’m not Takahiro’s m-mistress or anything!” Kei shrieked, waving her hands about in a panic. She then turned to me as she came to a realization. “Oh. Um. No. It’s not like I hate the idea or anything, I just...”

“Who cares about that!” Helena yelled, ignoring Kei’s tearful pleas. “Anyways! Shiran! You’re telling me to have a mock battle with the savior, right?!”

“Yes. Takahiro is suitable for the role. Besides, he is also my student in the ways of the sword.”

Helena pursed her lips. She was very clearly affected by that last statement. It was the deciding blow.

“F-Fine! I just have to fight, right?!” she said, nodding along but still looking a

little nervous.

“I’m glad you accept,” Shiran said with a satisfied smile.

“H-Hmph. Aren’t you all composed?”

Shiran’s smile reined in Helena’s impetuous attitude a little. It looked like they were actually pretty good friends.

“Get ready!” Helena declared, thrusting her finger at Shiran. “I’ll bring you to tears!”

“Please say that to Takahiro. He’s the one you’ll be facing.”

“Like I can possibly say that to him!”



Jumping right to the conclusion of the mock battle, Helena was a pretty skilled fighter. The word nimble summed her up very well. Her senses were sharp, her swordsmanship was solid, and her footwork was light. She was quick to step in and was perhaps a little faster than me. Conversely, she wasn’t physically strong enough to catch my blows, but she still managed to hang in there for a pretty long time.

In the end, she gave up due to exhaustion. It had turned out to be a pretty satisfying training session for me, but the trouble came afterward. Some of the villagers among the spectators were hoping to participate.

I’d seen them before. They’d helped out with the suppression of the azure hares. I glanced over to Shiran, wondering what we should do about this, but then I froze. She looked ready to give me a push on the back, probably seeing this as a good opportunity not to be missed.

Before I knew it, a queue had formed. It was too late to refuse now. What followed was an endless repetition of hopefuls and mock battles. At first, it was just the elves who’d gone out to suppress the azure hares with us. After that, others started to join in, and the queue just kept getting longer.

Numbers had a power all on their own. Facing one or two opponents was one thing, but ten or twenty was physically exhausting. The progress I’d made with reinforcing my body produced amazing results, but I wasn’t omnipotent.

“Are you all right, sir?” a young man asked, a wooden sword in his hand. “You seem to be panting pretty heavily...”

“I’m fine... Let’s start.”

To be honest, this was pretty harsh. Still, I started to understand that that was exactly what made it good training. If my usual training with Gerbera was a four-hundred-meter dash, then this was a marathon.

I stepped forward, my feet as heavy as lead. My sword hand was numb. The gap between our abilities was gradually getting smaller. At this rate, I would eventually fall to my opponent. How could I avoid this seemingly inevitable future?

I needed to move more efficiently. Each breath was agonizing, and my body was sluggish. But because of that, I managed to figure out when I was pointlessly exerting myself. Just like I was now.

I fended off an incoming thrust, but I’d wasted energy in the process. I’d put too much strength into it. I’d stepped in too far. And it had tired me out all the more. I focused on shaving off these excess movements one by one while I recalled all that I’d fostered to date. Shiran had taught me well. I simply hadn’t been able to put her teachings into practice.

I didn’t have much talent for fighting. Each and every time I noticed the unnecessary excess in my movements, I remembered what Shiran had taught me and then corrected myself. That was all I could do. It was an irritatingly slow process, but I didn’t hate it. In other words, I was improving, one step at a time.

“Next!”

Partway through, I’d lost track of who was even asking for a mock fight. Fortunately, the elves maintained their enthusiasm, their zeal increasing with the passage of time. I had no shortage of training partners, including those who went right back into the queue several times.

The never-ending training went on—while I kept myself hydrated—until the sun was on the verge of setting. I was dead tired by then, but it was a rewarding experience. My personal improvement wasn’t the only fruit of this training either. After it was over, the elves thanked me as I was about to leave.

“Thank you very much for today, sir.”

I suddenly noticed their attitude. They weren't acting strangely stiff or awkward, but respectful and gracious. That was when I finally realized Shiran's intent.

“Thanks, Shiran,” I said on the way back to the house with her and Lily after parting with the villagers.

“What's this about?” she asked.

“I feel like we've gotten closer to the villagers.”

By crossing blades, the villagers who'd once been overawed were now more comfortable with me. The training session had basically been a form of cultural exchange.

“So you noticed?” Shiran said, smiling, though she looked somewhat embarrassed. “Forgive me for not consulting you beforehand. I only thought of it then and there. Besides...I believed you would manage it better if I didn't say anything.”

She was implying that I would've read too much into it. It had in fact worked, so I wasn't going to complain.

“I think it was time well spent for the villagers too,” Shiran added happily, looking up at the reddening sky. “I don't mean in the sense that they were able to get some real training. With this, they learned of you as an individual, and not as a savior from their fantasies. What's more, I can thank you for your help with the azure hares like this. As indebted as I am to you, I believe this is important.” After that, Shiran's voice turned slightly rueful. “Having said that, I didn't expect *that* many people to gather.”

“Yeah, that was pretty much nonstop, huh?” Lily agreed, having watched the training with Shiran the entire time.

“I guess saviors really are a big deal to them,” I said, nodding as I recalled the passion the elves had displayed.

“No, Takahiro. You've got it wrong,” Shiran said meaningfully. “To be more precise, they were relieved to be free from the danger of the azure hares.

However, I believe that was nothing more than the impetus.”

Shiran could see something that I couldn't. She narrowed her one blue eye, then continued.

“There is a certain charm to your swordplay, Takahiro. I can feel it myself, and I'm sure the others are the same. That's the reason all the villagers were so enthusiastic about training with you.”

“That's a little... How do I even put it? You're praising me a bit too much,” I said, bewildered by her statement. “I mean, I've gotten stronger, yeah, and I won't deny that... But still, saying that I can attract others with my swordplay is going too far. In truth, if you compare me to any of the other cheaters, I'm absolutely pitiful.”

“No. That is exactly why, Takahiro,” Shiran said, her blonde hair swaying behind her as she shook her head. “Your swordsmanship is an accumulation of steady effort. It is something you have struggled to acquire, all so you wouldn't be a hindrance and could avoid losing what is dear to you. You smeared yourself in mud, withstood the agony, and overcame fierce battles to the death many times over. These things are obvious when watching you.”

Shiran smiled gently as she went on.

“It may not be something out of a dazzling tale. It may be plain, and even clumsy. But that is exactly why we can sympathize with it. Even Kei admires you. Will you deny her feelings?”

“That's kinda...unfair.”

“Sorry,” Shiran said with a giggle. “But please do forgive me. I'm very proud I've had the opportunity to teach you how to use a sword.”

“You're exaggerating,” I replied, smiling bitterly.

“Not at all,” Shiran said quietly, shaking her head once more. “Just that one thing gives worth to my existence...”

It really felt like an exaggeration to me. Her statement was so serious. It did suit her, though. The bitterness of my smile only deepened, but for some reason, I was at a loss for words. It was like some large, indescribable lump was

tumbling into the depths of my heart. What exactly was this feeling?

I searched deep within myself, but I couldn't come up with any ideas. It was as if I were trying to feel for an object through a thick piece of cloth. I just couldn't guess its identity. Was it just my imagination?

"We've arrived," Shiran said, bringing me back from my thoughts. Before I knew it, we were standing before the house we were borrowing. "Well then, I will head to my uncle's place."

"Oh, hang on a sec, Shiran," I said, calling her to a stop.

"What is it?" she asked, turning back to me with a curious look.

I opened my mouth, but I couldn't find the appropriate words. Guided entirely by my impulse to call out to her, I simply said, "If something happens, let me know right away, okay?"

Uncharacteristically, Shiran stared blankly back at me. When she made this kind of face, she closely resembled Kei.

"What's with that?" she said, giggling. "Is this maybe about what happened in the afternoon? Just as I said back then, I was only feeling a little sick from the stench of blood. There's no need for concern. You're a worrywart, just as ever, Takahiro."

She spoke amicably, and maybe she was right. Of course I'd worry when she nearly collapsed, but I couldn't deny that I was overly sensitive to each and every one of her actions.

"Please don't misunderstand, Takahiro," she added. "I'm happy you worry about me. Thank you very much. But really, it's all right." She really did look happy. "I'm fine," she added with a smile.

"Is that so...?"

"Yes, it is. More importantly," Shiran said, changing the topic, "it's about time for dinner. If we take too long, my uncle will have to wait for us. You need to wash off your sweat, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Very well. I shall inform them of such."

Her consideration for me made me feel like I was worrying too much. The suppression of the azure hares and the cultural exchange with the villagers had gone so well that maybe I'd become overly sensitive to the tiniest bit of trouble along the way.

"I'll see you later, then," Shiran said with a sweet smile before leaving.

We couldn't keep Melvin and the others waiting too long, so I returned to the house.

Chapter 9: The Village at Night

“We truly are indebted to you for handling this, Takahiro.”

After dinner, I remained in the chief’s residence.

“Thanks to you, the village has escaped disaster,” Melvin continued, sitting across the table from me as both he and Leah lowered their heads.

“It’s nothing. I’ve already received plenty in return.”

“About that, I’ve heard Shiran has negotiated with the army to take on the financial burden for the village.”

“We need to help each other out in times of need.”

In this world, people had to hire friendly foreign powers and noble houses to deal with the threat of monsters. The reward I would receive for dealing with the azure hares was based on this system. Nevertheless, it was too much of a burden on a poor village’s coffers, so the army was to handle a large portion of it.

In exchange, the villagers were to transport the blue stones that we’d gotten from the azure hares and offer them to the army. By selling them for use in dyes, the army could recover a portion of the expenses they were to pay me, and the village would be spared from having to spend over a week liquidating the goods in town.

The village was handling a remaining portion, but after informing them that I didn’t need to stockpile money I wouldn’t have many chances to use, it was decided that they would provide us with supplies instead.

I was planning to spend a good while in Shiran’s hometown, the neighboring village to this one, so we figured that whatever they could prepare for us without being a burden on them would be plenty. The village was taking the large amount of azure hare meat we’d gotten, so even deducting what they were to pay me, it shouldn’t affect them.

“In any case, Takahiro and Shiran were really impressive,” Leah said earnestly. “Even their orders given in the moment were masterful. It seems I’m not suited to taking command in such situations. I ended up losing my presence of mind and caused the other villagers to panic. I am so ashamed.”

After Leah let out a sigh, her beautiful smile returned.

“It’s a relief that things ended without a single casualty,” she added. “We cannot thank you enough.”

She then exchanged looks with Melvin. He nodded to her, then turned to me.

“By the way, sir,” he started.

“What is it?”

“I’ve heard that you hope to live your life out in a village.”

“Did Shiran tell you?”

I was surprised by the sudden change of topic, but it wasn’t all that unexpected. I’d spoken about this with Shiran beforehand, consulting her about whether there was anyone we could trust.

“So it’s true?” Melvin asked.

“Yes.” I nodded, finding his attitude curious. “You won’t ask why?”

“I’ve heard from Shiran that there are extenuating circumstances.”

“I see.”

I’d told Shiran that I didn’t mind if she revealed what she believed was necessary to mention. It turned out that she’d told Melvin and Leah that I was burdened with circumstances that couldn’t be brought to light. The fact that she’d told them that much indicated how much she trusted them.

“Your situation could be very difficult to accept. That was how she described it to us,” Melvin continued gravely.

“Yes... That’s right.”

I gulped. If they rejected me now, we wouldn’t be able to build up any trust. Maybe it would’ve been better to hide that we had extenuating circumstances. I couldn’t help but worry about such things.

However, I'd never told Shiran to keep that hidden. On the contrary, I'd told her to go ahead and bring it up herself if it seemed appropriate. After spending the last few days with the elves here, I'd felt it would be better that way. Nonetheless, I still didn't know whether my decision was right.

And so, after Melvin and Leah exchanged glances once more, he turned to me and said in a relaxed tone, "If you truly wish for that, sir, then we have the space to accept you."

"Really?!"

My voice naturally got louder. I'd thought they were going to reject me. Seeing me bend forward over the table, Melvin nodded.

"Akerian royalty invited you to our nation to begin with. The royal family is always protecting us. We owe them so much. We wouldn't reject their decision, no matter what kind of circumstances plague you. Furthermore, we are personally indebted to you, Takahiro. We are not such ingrates that we would leave such a debt unpaid. Besides..."

Melvin paused, a smile forming on his scarred face.

"I also happened to witness today's training. If it was known that I rejected you after that, the villagers would all be furious with me," he added jokingly.

"Thank you very much," I said, bowing my head deeply.

"Th-There's no need for that, sir," Melvin said, rising from his seat in a fluster. "We should be the ones thanking you."

I raised my head as Melvin continued.

"Shiran said that she owes you a tremendous debt. She asked us to hear you out."

"Shiran did that...?"

"Yes. We weren't informed of the specifics, but we heard that you and your companions saved Shiran and Kei during the calamity at Fort Tilia. Those two are our family. We couldn't possibly treat somebody who saved our family with disdain."

I could sense his true feelings in his words. They were homely, dutiful, and

driven by emotion. Such were the elves of reclamation villages.

“I don’t know where you’ll choose to settle down, but if need be, please come by our village. We will always welcome you with open arms.”



“Thank goodness, right, Master?”

After we left the chief’s house, Lily sidled up against me. She pulled on my arm with both of hers. I could feel the warmth and softness of her body.

“From the way Melvin and Leah spoke, things are going better than expected, huh?” she said, looking up at my face with a sweet smile that came from the bottom of her heart.

“Yeah.”

I nodded back to her, dazzled by her smile shining under the moonlight. Things had gone smoothly because it’d been the commander’s request, but I was still happy to have been so readily accepted. Shiran’s efforts to convince them also played a large role. She’d gone out of her way to vouch for us. I couldn’t thank her enough.

“I’m grateful. I really need to thank Shiran for this...” Just then, something came to mind. “Right. Let’s go see how she is.”

During our stay in the village, Shiran and Kei were using a separate house from us. It wasn’t all that large a village, so taking a detour and stretching our legs on the way back was nothing.

Lily looked a little confused by my statement, though. “Right now? Isn’t it a little late?”

We’d ended up talking with Melvin and Leah for quite a while, so it was already dark out.

“We can drop by tomorrow morning, can’t we?” Lily added.

“Well, that’s true, but...”

She had a point, so my reply came out half-baked. I wanted to thank Shiran, but doing so at this hour was largely an excuse. In the end, I couldn’t stop

thinking about Shiran's behavior.

I wanted to check on her. Maybe I was just being a worrywart, but that urge spurred me on. Something told me that I had to. Looking back on this later...it had been some kind of ill portent.

"I've got a little business with her," I said.

"Hmmm."

Lily looked like she didn't understand, but she didn't object. The two of us headed toward Shiran's lodging. Several minutes later, Lily spotted something.

"Huh? Isn't that Helena over there?"

I could see a black shadow hiding in the shade of a tree a small distance away, but I could only make out a small figure in the darkness. Having heard us, the shadow turned our way. We got closer, and only then could I tell that it was Helena.

"Did something happen?" I asked, seeing how clearly uneasy she was, even under the dim moonlight.

"Mister Takahiro..."

After saying my name, Helena lowered her gaze. It was obvious something had happened.

"What's wrong?" I asked. At times like this, it did no good to rush things. I kept my voice as relaxed as possible. "We might be able to help."

Helena glanced up and bit her lip. Either she was hesitating to tell me or she was unsure how to put it. After a few seconds, she finally spoke.

"It's...about Shiran."

"Shiran? What about her?"

Helena opened and shut her mouth a few times, then said, "Could you follow me? It's this way. Please keep quiet."

She started moving without even waiting for my reaction. She was restless. I exchanged glances with Lily, then followed her. The village was very quiet at night. There were no other villagers walking around outside. There was a night

watch, but they were on the lookout for monsters on the outside, so they were gathered in watchtowers on the walls. They weren't keeping an eye on the village itself.

The only sounds that reached my ears were the slight rustling of the trees and our footsteps. Helena came to a sudden stop under the shade of another tree, turned our way, and beckoned us over. Once we were closer, she wordlessly pointed at something.

It was a sturdy-looking building. The wooden door was open, perhaps because someone had forgotten to shut it. It was pitch-black inside, so I couldn't see beyond the door. A sticky darkness hung over everything.

"It's that building over there," Helena said, her voice trembling slightly.

"What about—"

Just as I was about to ask for clarification, someone stumbled out of the open door. It was Shiran. She was a little far away, but I wouldn't mistake her for anyone else. It was definitely her. Yet...for some reason, once I saw her, my spine felt like it had frozen over.

Bathed with moonlight, she stumbled about left and right as her blonde hair swayed behind her. She circled around the building, or more like tottered around it, and we could no longer see her. That was when I realized that I'd been holding my breath. Helena seemed to have been doing the same.

"I-I had something I wanted to talk about with Shiran, so I went to see her," she whispered, her breathing somewhat uneven. "And then I saw her heading out to go somewhere. I tried to call out to her...but something chilled me."

Helena trembled as she recalled the experience.

"I-It's weird, right? But I couldn't call out to her," she continued. "I just knew something was wrong, so I couldn't leave her be. That's why I secretly followed her. And then she went in there..."

"What's that building?" I asked.

"The storehouse. It's used for the village's food stockpiles."

"Food..."

What was this? What was going on? I had a horrible premonition.

“She shouldn’t have anything to do in there at this time...” Helena said, her voice hoarse as it vanished into the heavy silence.

I took a breath of the lead-like air, then said, “Let’s go look.”

Lily and Helena silently nodded back to me. We snuck out from behind the tree and quickly made our way to the storehouse. I took a look around, just in case, but couldn’t spot Shiran. I then started to enter the open door to look inside.

“Master, wait,” Lily said, holding her arm in front of me. “I’ll go first.”

A small red glyph took shape in her hand, creating a magic flame as she stepped inside. I followed right behind her. Lily’s light illuminated the darkness, where we saw azure hare meat scattered all over the ground.

Chapter 10: The Knight's Secret

Illuminated by the magic red fire, the objects scattered on the ground cast deep black shadows that swayed about. The azure hare meat that had been stored here was now in disarray. In this world, refrigeration was only available to a portion of the wealthy and to specialized facilities, so it was common to preserve meat by salting it. This meat had been in the middle of that process.

As it was now, it wasn't suitable for consumption. Well, it was technically edible given the effort. So long as one could bite into, chew on, and swallow it, anything could be eaten, but nobody would normally do that. There was no reason to do so, yet half-eaten fragments of dehydrated and discolored meat lay scattered on the ground.

I looked down in astonishment.

"What the...?" a girl muttered behind me.

I turned around to see Helena trembling, her hand to her mouth. Due to the shock of the moment, I'd completely forgotten that she was with us.

"M-Mister Takahiro," Helena said, her voice hollow. This must have been gut-wrenching for her. "What did...Shiran do? What...? Why...?"

Her words reminded me of a very important point—Shiran. Yes, this was Shiran's doing. I didn't know what was going on, but Shiran had definitely done this, which meant things could be pretty bad. The impatience building inside me woke me from the daze that had overcome me. I saw a flashback of Shiran stumbling out of this building. She clearly wasn't her normal self right now. I couldn't possibly ignore it.

"We need to go after Shiran," I said, finally regaining my senses. "Lily."

"Mm."

Lily focused and sniffed at the air. I didn't know where Shiran had gone, but Lily could track her scent. This was a race against time; we had to catch up to her right away. However, as I turned on my heels, my feet came to a sudden

stop.

“Mister Takahiro.”

Helena looked up at me. Her face, illuminated by Lily’s fire, was still deeply marked by confusion, but there was another emotion there too.

“I’ll go with you,” she said.

I’d predicted this, but I couldn’t allow it.

“No, you can’t.”

“Why?!”

“Because...”

I hesitated as she looked to me for a reason. There was no way I could tell her the truth. Why had Shiran done this to begin with? I had given it some thought, and only one thing came to mind: a side effect of turning into an undead monster—a demilich.

Shiran had once turned almost entirely into a ghoul, and my guess was that she was experiencing those symptoms again right now. If so, I couldn’t bring Helena with me. She didn’t know anything, so Shiran’s behavior was already abnormal to her. If we brought her along, she might see something much more disturbing. How much would it shock her? I was sure it would turn into the worst-case scenario, so I decided that she couldn’t come with us.

The one silver lining was that Shiran was acting far more docile than that time at Fort Tilia. If she’d truly turned into a ghoul, then she’d be attacking humans. Yet all she’d done was eat the azure hare meat. Sure, it was odd behavior, but she hadn’t crossed the line yet. There was still time. If we caught her right away without anyone finding out, we could settle this quietly. That was, of course, excluding the girl who’d already seen her.

In any case, Helena noticed I was hesitant to say anything, and she suddenly looked like she’d realized something.

“Do you maybe know why Shiran is acting like this?” she asked.

“Yeah...” I said, nodding. There was no point in denying it now.

Helena held her hand to her chest. “Is Shiran sick?” she asked.

“Something like that... She’s kind of having a problem with her body.”

“Is that so...?”

Helena bit her lip. She could tell that Shiran wasn’t simply sick. There was no fooling her after she’d witnessed the scene in the storehouse. Would I have to resort to sealing her mouth, even if I had to force the issue? I gritted my teeth. If I really wanted to, I had the means to do it. It was entirely feasible. I could just use my authority as a savior to order Helena to keep quiet.

Needless to say, that was the worst thing I could do. My original goal was to build trust with the villagers, and doing so would damage that trust. But to avoid the worst...there was no other choice. Shiran’s face came to mind, and I resolved myself for what I had to do. However, Helena opened her mouth just before I could say anything.

“Very well,” she said.

“What?”

“I will do as you say, sir,” she declared stiffly.

“Are you fine with that?” I asked, somewhat bewildered.

“Shiran trusts you, so I do too.”

Her reply was so simple that I had trouble gauging her true intent.

“Is there anything I can do?” she asked earnestly.

From what I could tell, Helena didn’t feel any sort of revulsion toward Shiran, even after witnessing her acting like that. Helena genuinely wanted to help.

After thinking it over a bit, I said, “Then...can you handle things here?”

I was curious why she’d so easily backed down, but I didn’t have the time to talk it over. If she was offering to help, then I couldn’t ask for more.

“If we leave this mess like it is, it’ll be clear that something happened,” I elaborated. “Someone needs to clean up.”

“Please leave it to me,” Helena replied reassuringly. “I’ll clean it all up, but what should we do about the meat that’s gone?”

“Let’s see... It’s strewn about, but it doesn’t look like all that much is missing. We can just say that I took some in preparation for tomorrow’s journey. Please pass that along to Melvin.”

I gave out instructions, reacting in the moment. Now that it had come to this, Helena’s presence was actually convenient.

“As for the half-eaten bits,” I continued, “can you just throw them in a bag and deliver them to Rose...to my companions? We’ll deal with it.”

“Understood.”

“Tell Rose and the others what happened, and inform them that there’s nothing to worry about, so they can sit back and wait. Also...”

“Keep it a secret from the villagers, right? I know. I’ll do all that you’ve asked of me.”

Her eyes shone with a strong sense of duty and a hint of dependence.

“But, in exchange,” she added, “please take care of Shiran.”

“Of course.”

Judging that things would be fine here in Helena’s hands, Lily and I exchanged glances and left the storehouse behind.



We left the cleanup to Helena and went after Shiran. I was connected to my servants through the mental path, and using it, we could sense each other’s positions and emotions. That didn’t apply to Shiran, though. As a former human, and with the special circumstances that made her my servant, our connection through the mental path was weak. I had to rely on Lily’s sense of smell for our pursuit.

After running for a while, we found a tall wall blocking our way.

“The village wall?” I muttered. “Did Shiran go outside?”

“Looks like it,” Lily confirmed.

The village was always on watch against monster attacks, even at night. If Shiran had thoughtlessly scaled the walls, it was highly likely that someone

would've seen her. However, the night watch didn't appear to be agitated in any way, so it seemed that Shiran had managed to slip out of the village without being spotted. She hadn't had such a presence of mind the last time she'd lost control.

After we descended the walls, we found ourselves in the Woodlands. The forest was already gloomy during the day, so at night, visibility was basically zero. I asked Lily to make a magic fire to use as a light.

I was in a rush, but the forest at night was overwhelmingly dark, even with a light. It was frustrating, but we had to proceed with caution while being wary of monster attacks. We had been walking for ten or so minutes when we finally found her.

"Shiran..."

She was crouched on the ground, her back turned to us, but there was no mistaking her. I called out in relief, causing her to start, but that was all. She didn't turn around to greet us.

Lily and I approached her. As we did, an awful smell assaulted my nasal cavities. It was a very characteristic smell—the stench of a living creature's guts. I then realized why Shiran was crouching down.

A moment later, Lily's light shone directly on Shiran. An ominous red being entered our vision. The girl lit up in the dead of night was stained crimson. Her blonde hair, her white armor—all of it was sullied with blood.

Shiran finally turned to us. "So it's you, Takahiro."

Her calm voice didn't suit the situation at all. Her one eye swiveled to look at me. She was so tranquil that I almost believed that nothing was out of the ordinary. Nonetheless, the azure hare corpses on the ground behind her grounded me in reality.

There were three of them. One looked like a beast had devoured it, and Shiran's lips, which so calmly spoke to me now, were so red that it couldn't have been due to a spray of blood from the downed monsters. I didn't even need to ask to know what had happened.



“You’re not surprised. Did you expect this?” she asked.

“It was kind of hard not to after everything that’s happened,” I said, smiling wryly.

Or, at least, I think I smiled—just as I always did. After all, during our search for Shiran, all my thoughts had run to that conclusion.

“It’s a side effect of turning into a demilich, right?” I continued. “I don’t know why, but you need to eat monster meat. That’s why you ate the preserved azure hare meat.”

“Yes... So you saw that? That explains why you’re here now. I was going to clean up after I got back to the village. What a mistake.”

Shiran smiled bitterly, ignoring the red blood staining her mouth. Her expression was the same as always.

“Did you clean that up for me, Takahiro? No, you got here awfully fast if that were the case. Have you maybe left it as is? If so, it might cause quite an uproar...”

“No, Helena was with us. I left the cleanup to her.”

“Helena...?” Shiran looked the slightest bit surprised by this, but her expression relaxed right away, and she smiled faintly. “I see... That’s a relief. She’s trustworthy.”

“Hey, Shiran? What exactly is going on?”

I was relieved to see her acting far calmer than I’d expected, but that only flooded my mind with even more questions.

“Did you leave the village to hunt monsters?” I asked. “Did you maybe suggest the nighttime patrols during our journey so you could do this too?”

According to Lily, Shiran had encountered an unusually large number of monsters for what were supposed to be simple nighttime patrols. In those instances, Shiran had smelled of blood. Seeing her now, anybody could have guessed what she’d been up to. She hadn’t been patrolling; she’d been actively hunting monsters. But that was as far as I could understand.

“Does that mean the preserved azure hare meat was no good?” I asked. Why would that be? I couldn’t figure it out, but something else bothered me far more. “If something was wrong, why didn’t you tell me?”

“My apologies, Takahiro,” Shiran said, lowering her head. Even smeared in blood as she was, she remained the image of an honest and noble knight. “I kept it a secret because I didn’t want to worry you. Yet I ended up both worrying you and being a bother.”

It was just like her to do that, so I lost my urge to criticize her behavior. A silence fell over us as she continued to bow.

“Master. For the time being, how about we calm down and talk it out?” Lily said after waiting for the right time to cut in. “I mean, look, Shiran is all dirty too.”

“You’re right,” I said, nodding. We wouldn’t make any progress like this.

Shiran raised her head, then said, “Very well. I will tell you everything.”



Lily and I moved a little farther away to allow Shiran to clean up. It didn’t take her all that long. She’d diligently wiped down her blood-smeared body, so the only traces left were the rust-like stench and the stains on her clothes.

“I’m usually more careful,” she said, “but this time, things got a little hard on me, so the stains are pretty bad. These clothes are no good anymore.”

“Are you okay now?” I asked.

“Yes. Sorry for worrying you,” she replied, earnestly bowing her head. “Now then, allow me to tell you everything.”

“Go ahead,” I said with a nod.

“Just as you’ve surmised, I currently require monster meat to function due to my nature as a demilich.”

She’d likely already considered what she was going to say, because her explanation came out smoothly.

“My body is different from when I was human. It doesn’t need nutrition from

food to move. I can eat, but it's not necessary. Because I'm a demilich now, my body moves by using mana." Shiran paused and looked down at her palm. "That's why I don't need to consume food. Well, that's what I believed at first. However..."

"You actually need to?" I was beginning to see where this was going. "Nutrition doesn't fuel an undead body; mana does. Meaning..."

"Yes. It seems my body can't function without sustenance. I need to absorb mana in one form or another."

Her physical health had been deteriorating because of a decrease in mana. When I thought about it, there'd been signs of this. After the commander was arrested, Shiran had withdrawn from the front line of battle for a while. She'd told me it was because of a decline in her combat abilities due to the imbalance of her mind and body from becoming a demilich. That wasn't entirely the truth, though. The imbalance wasn't a complete lie, but her mana deficiency was a far more severe problem.

"And that's where monsters come in," Shiran said, stealing a glance at Lily. "By eating the corpses of monsters, I can acquire mana. You're already aware of this. This is how Kudou Riku's monsters gain strength, and it's how Lily increased her mana with all the monster corpses in the wake of Fort Tilia's attack. I've been eating monsters following the same line of logic."

"So...what? To stop your mana from declining, you've been eating monsters? You can't just eat their meat; you need to ingest their mana. If so, then the meat that's been preserved in salt for the last few days is no good?"

"Exactly. Be it because too much time has passed or because it has been treated in some way, I couldn't get the mana I needed from it."

"And that's the reason regular food is a no go too?"

"Yes. For that reason, during our journey, I went hunting whenever I was on nighttime patrol. Fortunately, nobody noticed. Well, just once, Berta spotted me."

"She did?"

"She was also hunting at the time."

I knew that Berta had been hunting monsters night after night. In her case, the goal was to grow stronger, much like Lily, but Shiran had been doing the same. It was inevitable that the two of them would bump into each other. That was how Berta had noticed that something was up with Shiran before anyone else.

“Please don’t blame her for keeping quiet about it,” Shiran added. “I asked her to. She was simply being sincere.”

Berta was definitely sincere by nature, but her silence had also delayed us from finding out.

I didn’t know how to reply to that, so instead I said, “That’s enough about the nighttime patrols. What have you been doing during our stays in towns?”

“Basically, I’ve been holding it in. Whenever I got the opportunity, I went outside. Sometimes, I could act on my own, like when I contacted the army and prepared goods.”

Now that I thought about it, when Rose and I walked around Diospyro, I thought I’d seen someone who looked like Shiran coming back into town. I’d thought I was mistaken since it had only been for an instant, but maybe that had really been her.

“I thought I could keep going without anyone finding out, but it seems I was a little too naive,” Shiran said with a small sigh. “When we met with the villagers, I lost my chance to hunt.”

“I see. When we were traveling with the elves, you couldn’t go out on nighttime patrols.”

“Yes. Therefore, I couldn’t eat any monsters.”

Shiran had been starving, which was what had led to this incident.

“Is that also why you were acting strange during the battle this afternoon?” I asked.

“Yes. That was a little dangerous. I was just barely managing to hold it in, but after the ruby bear’s blood sprayed all over me, my sense of reason faltered. I somehow managed to endure until the evening, but I couldn’t hold it in any

longer, so here I am now. I'm ashamed you saw something so disgraceful."

Shiran bowed deeply once more.

"You hit your limit, right?" I said, shaking my head. "If so, there's no helping it. But if you'd come to me for advice, I'm sure we could've helped you before it got to this."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. There's nothing to apologize for. You can just rely on us from now on."

Anybody was prone to failure. Even I'd come close to death because of failures that I didn't want to think about. I couldn't criticize Shiran for this. It wasn't an irrecoverable mistake or anything, so we just needed to be careful from now on. As a splendid knight, missteps like this served her far better than they would someone like me.

"Let's return to the village for now," I said. "After that, we can talk it out with everyone. It'll be fine. Eating monsters isn't all that big a deal among our group."

"Yup, it's pretty much an everyday thing for me too," Lily added, changing her fingers into slimy feelers. "It's much too late to care about that now."

"Lily's right," I said. "We can manage your need for monster meat too. It'll work out somehow if we help. Everyone is sure to give you a hand."

"Thank you very much..."

After all that, Shiran finally smiled. Hers was the reliable face of a knight, one that could give anyone unconditional peace of mind.

Finally feeling a sense of relief, I led the two of them back to the village.

Chapter 11: The Girl's Secret

After that incident, dawn broke without anything of note happening. We departed the reclamation village that day, just as scheduled. Our destination was Shiran and Kei's hometown, Kehdo. It would be a two-day walk, which was a little different from what we'd planned, but Leah and Helena were joining us on this journey.

On the morning of our departure, during breakfast at the chief's residence, Helena had said that she wanted to come with us to the neighboring village. She felt an extraordinary amount of rivalry and affection—not that she'd ever admit it—for Shiran. It made sense she wanted to come along.

That was apparently how her grandparents, Melvin and Leah, had interpreted it. However, I knew the real reason why Helena wanted to come with us. She'd witnessed yesterday's events. She was surely worried about Shiran and wanted to hear more about her circumstances. I hadn't refused her. On the contrary, I needed to speak with her myself, so this was a bit of a godsend.

Last night, Helena had completed the task I'd entrusted her with perfectly. She'd cleaned up the storehouse without anyone finding out, leaving no trace of what Shiran had done whatsoever, and then told Melvin that I'd taken some of the azure hare meat for our journey. All I'd had to do was match her story.

If Helena hadn't found Shiran last night, the situation might've gotten much worse. I had to thank her, and I felt I should follow up with her too. Unfortunately, I hadn't gotten time to speak with her alone because she'd had to rush to get ready to leave. Still, there were two days until we reached Kehdo, so there would be plenty of opportunities for us to talk.

Once it was decided that Helena would join us, Leah had also requested to come along. She was probably worried that her granddaughter would act carelessly in some way. I could understand her on that front, and I had no reason to decline her request.

"I must apologize for Helena's unreasonable behavior, Takahiro," she'd said

after making the request.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind. What about you, Leah? Is it okay for you to leave the village for a while?”

“Thank you for your consideration, but it isn’t a problem. My role in the village is to act as my husband’s substitute.”

Leah had explained that she didn’t have to be there at all times. She had, in fact, left the village to petition Diospyro for help. The married couple basically split up their work that way.

“Besides, I think this is a good opportunity,” she’d added. “I was already planning on dropping by Kehdo in the near future, anyway.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Reclamation villages in this area visit each other about once a month. Connections between fellow villages in the Woodlands cannot be neglected, after all.”

For example, monster sightings in the vicinity were vital information to all villages. To that end, despite the slight danger, the villages regularly shared info with each other. At times, villages also helped each other during crises.

It was only practical to do so, but the main reason they maintained contact was a strong sense of comradery among the people living in these dangerous lands. Not only that, but much like Leah and Shiran, some villages were connected by blood. By maintaining solidarity, not only within their own village, but with their neighbors as well, they were able to survive in the Woodlands.

“Our hands were full with the azure hares, so communication has stagnated as of late. But now that the problem is resolved, I need to go inform them. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“It would be lonely to part with Shiran and Kei so soon after reuniting with them.”

Leah said this with a smile. Shiran had stayed in Leah’s village for a few months as a child, so maybe she was like another granddaughter to Leah.

Currently, Leah was walking about ten meters ahead of our manamobile with Shiran, Kei, and Helena. The four elves chatted cheerfully. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but they all looked like they were enjoying themselves.

"From what I can tell, there doesn't seem to be any particular problem with Shiran," Rose said from the seat next to mine as I watched the elves in front of us. "I was quite anxious when I heard of what happened last night."

Rose was also thinking about Shiran. I could hear the concern in her voice.

"Is she all right now?" she asked. "Does this mean yesterday's incident was enough to handle her problem?"

"Yeah. That's what Shiran told us," I replied, nodding. "She ate her fill yesterday. The same thing will happen if she doesn't keep it up, of course. That's why we had that talk last night."

The previous evening, after Lily and I brought Shiran back, we'd talked with everyone about what we were going to do. We were a little short on sleep as a result, but it was a necessary measure.

"So long as we cooperate, Shiran's constitution won't really get in the way of anything. For example, even on this journey, one of us can go on night watch and let her slip away at any time."

She'd been fussing about troubling others to a strange degree to begin with, which had prevented her from seeking help. Normally, this wouldn't have been much of a problem.

"Shiran doesn't even need to hunt on her own in the first place," I said. "Lily's nose makes her an excellent hunter. If she were to go out and get food for Shiran, then Shiran wouldn't need to slip away at all."

"That's true. I believe that would be best," Rose agreed. "In the end, her wanting to not bother others caused more issues. An oversight like that doesn't seem to suit Shiran, in my opinion."

"It's her sense of responsibility going too far. That's all."

"Aah, I see... You can interpret it like that too," Rose said, cocking her head slightly. "It must be the case if you say so, Master. But it's still a difficult

problem. I recognize Shiran as a cut above the rest. For someone like her to make such a mistake...”

“Yeah. Anyone can mess up. That’s why the important part is what comes next. It certainly was uncharacteristic of her, but she’ll be sure never to repeat it again.”

“Yes, I believe the same.”

“Still, it’s good that nothing serious came of it,” I said, smiling.

Honestly speaking, I’d worried about how this would work out for a while now, but we got by just fine. We’d managed to fool them about the missing azure hare meat, and the only witness, Helena, was cooperating with us. We also had countermeasures in place for things to come. The one thing left undone was following up with Helena, but seeing as how we wouldn’t arrive at the village until tomorrow evening, there was plenty of time to talk with her.

Our original goal of finding a village we could stay in long-term was looking doable, and Shiran’s problem, which had been weighing on my mind, had also been resolved. Feeling relieved, I let out a small sigh. Just then, the cloth covering the carriage behind me lifted up.

“Majima-senpai, Rose,” Katou said, poking her head out.

“What’s up, Katou?” I asked, refocusing myself. “Did something happen?”

“Huh? Oh. No. Nothing like that,” Katou said, laughing it off and waving her hand. “I was just wondering what you were up to.”

“Oh, is that all?”

I’d figured she had something important to talk about. My head had been full with Shiran lately, so I’d jumped to conclusions.

“What were you two talking about?” Katou asked with a smile, looking at both of us before cocking her head. “Were you maybe talking about Rose?”

“What about her?” I asked. I had no idea what she was hinting at.

“Huh? You haven’t talked about it yet? Rose has been so happy that the piece she’s been working on has been going smoothly.”

“Really?” I looked over at Rose, who hesitantly nodded back to me. “Huh. You should’ve told me.”

“No. You’ve been busy with exterminating the azure hares and negotiating with the villagers. Aside from that, you’ve also had to spend time with Gerbera and Lily. Reporting completion would be one thing, but something so trivial as only being partway done would be...”

It was just like her to be so reserved in telling me. Although, it was a different matter entirely whether this actually coincided with what I wished she would do.

As I wondered how I could address this, Katou suddenly leaned forward. “That’s no good, Rose,” she said, poking Rose’s cheek with her dainty finger. “If you act like that, you won’t have anything to say other than what is absolutely necessary.”

“Mana...”

“She’s right,” I joined in, grateful for Katou’s persuasiveness. “You don’t need to be so reserved. It’s fun to speak with you, Rose. Don’t take that away from me.”

“Understood...”

Rose nodded. She restlessly twiddled her gloved hands together and looked my way, a faint and awkward smile on her face. She was so adorable that my heart thumped. Sensing that I couldn’t keep looking at her face like this, I casually averted my gaze and looked forward.

For a while now, Rose had been making my heart skip a beat like this. She could now dress up as a woman, and because she could make natural expressions, she no longer needed to hide her face with a mask. These heart-thumping incidents were going to multiply with all of that. I’d also been talking with Rose more than before, so I only grew more aware of these changes in her.

I didn’t really have a reason to feel this way...but I was under the delusion that a net was closing in around me. This sensation of being driven into a corner definitely wasn’t unpleasant, but it did make me feel a little restless.

“So? What’s this progress Katou mentioned, Rose?” I asked, trying to hide my

restlessness.

“Right. It’s regarding my research on manamobiles,” she answered.

“Manamobiles? Oh yeah, you’ve been looking into them for a while now. Are you finally able to make one?”

“No, not yet, but I’ve made a little progress. Also, I’ve been trying several things out in parallel with some new equipment and am beginning to see how they can be applied in practice.”

“Hmm. I’m looking forward to it,” I said, continuing our cheerful conversation as I felt the shaking of the clattering vehicle. “I’d like to ask what kind of equipment you’re talking about, but I guess it’ll be better to just see it in action.”

“I believe that would be for the best. There are some things I cannot show right here and now. We can discuss them at a later time while we’re taking a break.”

“Sure. Sounds fun.”

“Yes. By all means, I would like to hear your impressions.”

Rose was innocent when it came to her craft. She effortlessly conveyed her cheerfulness, and it was pretty adorable. I enjoyed these conversations with her. It was also relaxing to me. Even though things were going well, there were still many hurdles that we had to clear to fulfill my objective. Relaxation was necessary to keep our focus on what was to come.

The clattering of the vehicle’s wheels resounded around us as our conversation hit a pause.

“Oh yeah,” Katou said, suddenly realizing something. “Going back to what I said earlier...”

“What is it?” I asked.

“You were talking with Rose before I came over, right? What about?”

Her tone was casual, and she was half looking for a new topic to discuss.

“About Shiran’s circumstances,” Rose answered.

“Oh, that,” Katou replied, lowering her voice as a shadow of anxiety crossed her innocent features. “It’s a little worrying, isn’t it? Shiran seems rather unstable, after all.”

“Huh...?”

I hadn’t expected that kind of reaction. When Rose and I had talked about it, we were under the impression that everything was fine now, so Katou’s comment caught me completely off guard. I had no idea what she was talking about.

However, it was far too late to start questioning it now, because something happened right at that moment. Among the elves walking in front of us, the girl at the end of the line dropped something that looked like a moderately sized stick.

It was, in fact, a severed arm.

I thought I was seeing things. I wanted to be seeing things, but I wasn’t. There was a bracer-covered arm on the ground. It had been cleanly severed somewhere near the elbow. Strangely enough, there was no blood coming from it, not even a drop. If I had to describe it, it was more like it had come off, rather than been cut off. It just seemed so out of place.

To me, it looked like a mannequin’s arm or some kind of toy. There was no sense of reality to it, as if it were some poorly constructed nightmare. Sadly, though, this was unmistakably reality, and a cruel one at that.

I’d thought everything was fine now. I’d been relieved and relaxed and had already started thinking of the future. I’d never even imagined that Shiran had lied about being all right or that she’d been driven into such a corner that she’d had no choice but to do so.

In the next instant, the tranquil air around us crumbled, and a shrill scream pierced the sky.

Chapter 12: Uncharacteristic

“Eeeeeek!”

Leah was the one to scream. Her eyes shot open in fright, and she put her hands to her mouth and fell on her rear. Her expression, though stiff, was convulsing. She wasn't overreacting either. She'd been happily chatting, and hearing a thud behind her, she'd turned around to find a severed arm on the ground. Anyone would lose themselves to fear and confusion in that situation. Some might even faint.

“Sh-Shiran! Y-Your...your arm?!”

That was all Leah could manage to get out. Kei and Helena, who'd been chatting with Leah just moments ago, also shrieked and turned pale. The three of them were looking at Shiran, whose eye was fixed on her own severed arm. Her normally tight expression slipped, and her face went slack as if she was in a daze. She froze in place for a good five seconds, then awkwardly raised her head to see that all eyes were on her. She shuddered.

“Ah...”

I had no idea what went through her mind in that instant. Perhaps she thought that she'd made an irrevocable mistake or that things were about to take a turn for the worse. I couldn't see her face from my position, so I had only my imagination for reference. However, it was clear as day that she was terribly agitated, especially given the uncharacteristic reaction that followed.

Shiran picked up her fallen arm, then dashed into the forest to the side of the road. Her unimaginable behavior caught me off guard, and for a few seconds, I wasn't even aware of the situation.

Coming to my senses, I hit the manamobile's brakes. The wheels grated as the vehicle jerked beneath me. Finding the deceleration to a stop too slow, I jumped from the driver's seat.

“Shiran!”

My heart grew impatient and heated. No matter how I looked at it, Shiran was making a big mistake. The unexpected accident had thrown her off, but running away wouldn't resolve anything. Besides being thoughtless, there was no point to it. I had to bring her back as soon as possible.

"Master! I shall go with you!"

I could sense Rose giving chase behind me, but I couldn't wait for her. I ran past the dismayed Leah, the petrified Kei, and the frozen Helena, and charged past the thickets that Shiran had vanished behind.

As soon as I left the path, the forest became dense. Rows of trees blocked my view, so I couldn't see Shiran at all.

"Oh! Over there!"

I thought I heard a faint noise and ran in its direction. I pushed my way through branches and bushes, but I quickly came to a stop.

"Dammit..."

I couldn't find her. I considered using the Misty Lodge's perception magic, but that was a pretty advanced spell. Even with Salvia's support, it would take a significant amount of time to gather the requisite mana, and Shiran could slip past its effective range while I did so.

"Master!"

I turned around and saw Lily and Rose running my way.

"Where's Shiran?" Rose asked.

"I lost her," I replied bitterly. "Lily, please find her."

"Mm."

Lily, having arrived just a few seconds after Rose, looked concerned. This was bad. Leah and Helena didn't know the full details of our situation, and we couldn't afford for them to see this. Last night, we'd managed to brush it off as a sickness, but that would be difficult to pull off this time. Katou was likely glossing it over for us right now, but we couldn't dodge the issue forever. There was no excuse for an arm falling off. That wasn't the only problem either.

“Master, what exactly is happening to Shiran’s body?” Rose asked from the back of the line as Lily walked forth to sniff out the trail. Rose couldn’t hide her bewilderment. “For her arm to suddenly fall off like that... She doesn’t have a body like mine. Some abnormal circumstance must be behind it.”

“I don’t know what exactly is going on either,” I replied as I continued to follow Lily. “But that wound was the one she got from Juumonji.”

“By Juumonji, you mean the exploration team member you fought at Fort Tilia?”

“Yup, that’s him... Oh, yeah, you weren’t there, huh?”

Right before the attack on Fort Tilia, Rose’s body had suffered major damage. Unlike Gerbera, she hadn’t faced Juumonji, so she hadn’t witnessed Shiran turning into an undead monster.

“Juumonji cut off Shiran’s left arm, but after she turned into an undead monster, she reattached it. The place where her arm separated just now was exactly where Juumonji cut her. It’s hard to believe that’s just a coincidence.”

“So, in other words, Shiran’s body is no longer able to maintain itself?”

Rose only had half the picture, but she’d arrived at the appropriate conclusion anyway.

“But wait,” she added, “yesterday, we discussed that mana maintains Shiran’s body. In that case...”

“She has a mana deficiency,” I explained, “and a serious one at that.”

“But Master,” Lily said, glancing back from the front. “Shiran told us yesterday that she was okay now, didn’t she? So why did this happen?”

“Well...” I sank into thought for a bit. “Normally, you’d assume that she didn’t actually get enough mana,” I said, brushing away the branch in my way. “In truth, she probably needs way more than she ingested. She needs to eat more monsters.”

“Mm-hmm. That’s what I thought. But why didn’t Shiran say so yesterday?”

“Maybe because if she needed more, it’d be that much more of a burden? This is Shiran we’re talking about. Hiding it from us to spare us trouble isn’t that

—”

I scowled before I could finish what I was saying. It felt like the words slipped right off my tongue. Something wasn't right. Shiran had hidden her condition out of consideration for us, which would normally make perfect sense, but that same consideration had accidentally revealed a shocking clue to Helena the other day. Would Shiran really repeat the exact same mistake one day later? Was she really that careless?

Before I knew it, my feet came to a stop. Once I realized this contradiction, my discomfort just kept growing. It was already unusual that she'd made a mistake yesterday. If she'd only consulted us, we would've told her that needing to hunt monsters wasn't a big problem for our group. Yet she'd kept it all to herself and almost revealed her secret to Helena. Just as Rose had said, that wasn't like her. So, was it really just an error in judgment? It was a little late to ask, but that question started bothering me now.

“Hey, Master?” Lily said, her expression dark. She was likely thinking the same thing as me. “Was Shiran really telling the truth yesterday?”

“Are you saying she lied to us?”

“I wouldn't go that far. I'm just thinking maybe she didn't tell us everything. I mean, if she was just being considerate, I doubt she'd ever mess up like this.”

I couldn't refute that. On the contrary, Lily's statement convinced me about Shiran's earlier behavior. After her arm fell off, Shiran had run away. I'd thought she was reacting to the chaos of the situation, but thinking back on it now, that was uncharacteristic of Shiran. It would have been far more convincing if she'd *had* to run away rather than repeat the same mistake three times in short succession. However, if she had, then I was at a loss.

“What is Shiran hiding?” I muttered. I couldn't come up with any ideas. “Why won't she tell us?”

At this rate, I'd have no idea what to do even if we caught up with her. If we couldn't do anything, that would be one thing, but we could say something careless and increase the burden on Shiran even more without knowing it.

I ground my teeth, and just then...

“Master.”

Mist formed in the air in front of me and took on the shape of a young woman, her golden-brown hair swaying in the air.



“Salvia?”

“May I have a moment?” she asked.

Unlike her usual carefree aura, the atmosphere around her was tense. She hadn’t shown herself since our time in Draconia. I hadn’t expected her to come out now, so I didn’t know how to react, but then something shocking happened.

“I have something to say about Shiran,” Salvia said.

“What is it?” I asked, my eyes wide. “Do you know something about this?”

“Yes. Just as you’ve surmised, she’s hiding something,” she declared.

Salvia did know something, then. She wasn’t really connected to Shiran in any way, so how did she know? I was a little curious, but that could wait for later.

“Please tell me,” I said, taking a step toward her. “What’s happening to Shiran’s body? Is there something I can do?”

“There is,” she confirmed. “Rather, it is something *only* you can do.”

“What...?” This was beyond my expectations. “Only me?”

“Yes. You might be the only one who can do anything about it,” Salvia said. Her words weighed heavily on me, but she continued. “All the same, Shiran may not want you to.”

“Huh...? What do you mean?” I was getting more and more perplexed.

Salvia gazed at me gravely. “If you truly wish to save Shiran, my dear...you must break her. Are you prepared to do that?”

Chapter 13: Everything I Overlooked

The turmoil caused by Shiran's condition brought up two questions. First, what was she hiding? And second, why was she hiding it? The most probable reason that came to mind was that she was being considerate, but that was hard to believe. She'd just made a terrible mistake yesterday by doing so, yet she repeated that same mistake today. Why would she do this?

Salvia had given me advice and told me what I could do for Shiran. However, that meant I could've dealt with it before this happened, so I couldn't understand why Shiran had never come to me for advice, especially since her behavior had revealed her secret to Leah and Helena.

This situation shouldn't have happened. Anybody could see what had to be done if they stopped and thought about it calmly. Shiran wasn't the type of person to make the wrong decision at times like this. She just wasn't...

That was exactly why I'd overlooked everything that led to this point.



When I found her, Shiran was crouching down on the forest floor. To get straight to the point, this whole situation was dangerous. This was the Woodlands, the most hazardous region in this world. Even though we were in the Fringes, the safest of the three zones within the Woodlands, being alone and off guard like she was still posed a risk to her life.

Despite that, Shiran paid no heed to her surroundings. Was this the composure of the powerful Alliance Knights' former lieutenant, the one known as the strongest knight in the northern Woodlands? No, not at all. It wasn't in her nature to act like that to begin with. But even considering that, her current state was in no way composed. There was only one thing on her mind right now. She didn't have the time to worry about anything else.

"...won't...connect..."

I strained my ears and could hear her muttering. Her words were quiet and

disjointed like a broken radio.

“It won’t connect. Why won’t it connect? Just connect.”

She sounded like she could start crying at any moment. Her pale face was steeped in despair.

“It won’t connect!”

Shiran was desperately trying to reattach her severed left arm, but no matter how hard she tried, it was no use. It remained detached, and the moment she let go, it fell back to the floor. She then repeated the exact same action. Her arm plopped to the ground. She picked it up and tried sticking it back on. Then again. And again. And again. Just like a broken machine. How long was she going to keep doing this?

“No...” Shiran finally came to a stop. “It won’t connect.”

She groaned and staggered to her feet.

“I need...more mana,” she said, sounding exhausted and restless. “I need...to find monsters.”

Her uncovered left eye shone with the light of madness characteristic of someone driven to the end of their rope.

“I’m fine. I’m still...fine.”

She kept repeating that to herself, but she was the only one who couldn’t tell that this was the exact opposite of fine.

“Find monsters...eat them...and then...”

She stopped talking. She finally realized I was standing there watching her.

“Taka...hiro?” she mumbled in a daze. “Lily? And Rose too.”

Her eye turned to the two girls behind me, and she slowly recognized the situation she was in. Her expression was so transparent that you could read her thoughts on her face the entire time.

“Aah... You came after me, right?”

Dumbfounded, she smiled. In just a few seconds, all traces of panic vanished from her face.

“Thank you very much, Takahiro. It seems I’ve caused you trouble again.”

Her voice was gentle and her demeanor calm. It was like her behavior just seconds ago had been a hallucination.

“I must apologize for running off like that. I was shaken by the suddenness of the event.”

Shiran lowered her head sincerely. She explained that she’d made a mistake due to the shock of the moment and apologized for causing us trouble. She was gallant and honest—behavior befitting a knight—but I’d seen her depravity just moments ago.

Seriously, my own foolishness made me want to vomit. Why had Shiran hidden this from us? The answer was in her behavior earlier—she’d reached the end of her rope. Despair and fear had festered in her heart. Before this, I couldn’t have even imagined it. Shiran was a noble knight with unshakable conviction, and I’d been under the impression that she was strong enough to handle anything.

Well, that was still true, but I’d convinced myself that her strength was absolute. She wasn’t so unshakable that she’d never known despair or fear. Shiran naturally had a weakness or two, and even though that was so obvious, I’d never realized it. In actuality, this was my failure, and I had to take responsibility for it.

I clenched my fist. Salvia had already told me what Shiran was hiding from us. She’d already told me that I was the only one who could do something and what effect that something would have on Shiran. I knew all of this, so I was resolved for what was to come.

“Takahiro?”

Shiran looked at me quizzically, sensing something amiss, but it was too late.

“Hold her down,” I commanded.

Lily and Rose obeyed without question. They marched in front of me and quickly grabbed Shiran.

“T-Takahiro...?”

Shiran didn't resist. She was too bewildered by the sudden development and couldn't react. She really was in a poor state. She was missing an arm and lacking in mana, so she couldn't have fought off Lily and Rose anyway. Still, it was better that she didn't resist. We would end all of this while she was still bewildered.

As I walked up to Shiran, I drew the sword at my waist. Holding her down from both sides, Lily and Rose forced Shiran to her knees.

“What are you—?!”

Shiran's trembling eye reflected the glimmer of my naked blade.

“If you wish to save Shiran, my dear...” An earnest voice played back in my mind. *“You must break her. Are you prepared to do that?”*

There was no need to ask. I brandished my sword without hesitation. The sharp blade tore through my skin with ease.

“Huh...? T-Takahiro...?”

A scarlet droplet fell on Shiran's pale skin. It was fresh blood—fresh blood falling from my left hand. I'd removed my bracer beforehand. Rose's masterwork had a splendid edge, and it split my palm in a perfectly straight line. A sharp pain assaulted my senses, but I was prepared for it and didn't let it show. I held out my hand to Shiran, no expression on my face.



Another droplet painted Shiran's cheek red. This would normally be a meaningless act of self-harm, but in this case, that wasn't what it meant.

"Ah..."

Shiran's cognition finally caught up with reality, and she sighed quietly. The change in her was dramatic.

"A-Aah..."

An expression of starvation overcame Shiran's features, half-hidden by her large eyepatch. It was as if the fresh blood falling from my hand were a fountain of water. In fact, that was exactly what it was to her. After all, this was what Shiran had been hiding from us.



Due to a mana deficiency, Shiran's undead body wasn't functioning properly. She could gain mana by eating monsters, though. She'd told us about it yesterday, and it was, in fact, true. It didn't contradict any knowledge we already had.

Nevertheless, why would that cause Shiran's arm to suddenly fall off? Given that she'd acquired mana, there was only one conclusion: she hadn't gotten enough. It wasn't all that strange; the mana gained from devouring a monster was slight. It simply meant that it wasn't enough to replenish her mana-deficient body. If she was to consume the amount of mana she needed, she had to eat from a far more fertile source—me.

This made sense once Salvia told me about it. Asarina was a perfect example. By sprouting from my hand, she'd been born as a unique monster. That was only possible because she was living off the body of a visitor.

Moving at overwhelming speed, mowing down hordes of monsters with a sword of light, transforming into an enormous dragon, and even connecting to monsters through the mental path—each of these powers manifested through mana. This made it clear that visitors were a far greater source of mana than any monster. Kudou Riku had caught wind of this fact before, which was why he'd aimed to power up his monsters by having them eat visitors.

Furthermore, our connection to each other had a positive effect in that regard. The mental path between me and my servants was a connection of mana, and I already knew that mana could flow from my servants into me. As such, the reverse was also true. By drinking my blood, Shiran could absorb mana much more efficiently than she could drinking from any other visitor.

In fact, there was a precedent for this. Back when Shiran first turned into an undead monster at Fort Tilia, I'd tried to restore her sense of reason during her ghoul rampage. As I attempted to get close enough to her to strengthen the mental path's connection, she'd taken a bite out of my shoulder.

That in itself had strengthened the mental path, but that wasn't the point. The important thing was that Shiran had been eating me. At the time, she'd licked my blood. She'd lapped at it like a kitten drinking milk, yet with the obscenity of a temptress.

I vividly remembered her entranced expression, giving her the air of a bewitching flower. Now I understood what it meant. Monster meat had been nothing more than a stopgap measure. My flesh and blood were actually the greatest form of nutrition for her, and Shiran couldn't resist now that it was in front of her.

"A-Aaah..."

It was as though I were presenting her with a gourmet meal when she was on the verge of death by starvation. Of course her sense of reason would go flying out the window.

"Aah..."

Her mouth half-open and her eye agape, Shiran stretched out her neck and was about to lick the bleeding hand I held before her. But right before she did, her white teeth snapped shut.

"I...can't..."

"Shiran..."

This was unexpected. I never thought she'd be able to regain herself in this situation. Considering how much pain her mind-rending hunger caused her on a regular basis, she couldn't have accomplished such a feat with half-hearted

willpower. Or perhaps she found this act too repulsive. Being a monster had pained her too much.

I recalled the events at the reclamation village we'd passed through right after leaving Fort Tilia.

"Please reconsider, Takahiro."

That night, Shiran had pointed out the change happening to my body. She'd touched on Gerbera's mana flowing through me, had warned me that I might end up as something neither human nor monster, and had tried to persuade me to put down my sword for good. When I refused to do so, she'd become uncharacteristically indignant.

What did that mean? Who was it who truly feared turning into something inhuman? Then I finally understood.

"Please stop...Takahiro."

Her voice was weak. Her eye pleaded with me as she looked up. She looked as if she was moments from dying, which wasn't that far from the truth. According to what I knew, if left as she was, Shiran would soon no longer be able to maintain her body. Eating monsters had been nothing more than a temporary measure. Even though doing so had kept her body from breaking down completely, it hadn't helped her recover at all. And now that she was reduced to such a state, it couldn't help her anymore. If I wished to save her, I had to make her drink my blood, even if it would wound her deeply.

"Sorry, Shiran."

Thus, I brought my blood-soaked hand closer to her lips.

Chapter 14: The Girl's Salvation

Time moved so slow, like the pain itself was making it slower. However, all things came to an end. After it was over, I sighed to myself. A terrible sense of exhaustion fell over me, but it was more of a mental thing instead of a physical one.

"Are you okay, Master?" Lily asked.

"Yeah," I replied, half on reflex.

"I'll heal you now," she said, grasping my hand.

She began casting healing magic. My blood had stopped flowing partway through the act, so I'd had to reopen the wound several times over. Still, it wasn't a very deep cut. Lily's magic would seal it shortly. On the other hand, magic couldn't heal some things so easily.

I glanced at Shiran, who was sitting on the ground. Her severed arm was already back in place. We'd managed to get her body back into a state of reduced activity, at least. The problem wasn't her patchwork body, though. It was her heart, and it would be difficult to heal that.

Maybe there was a better way, one where nobody had to get hurt, but I couldn't come up with such a convenient method. Nevertheless, I wanted to save Shiran, so I'd hurt her to do so. No matter how I glossed over it, that was the truth, and I wasn't going to run away from that responsibility.

I took a deep breath and called out to her.

"Shiran..."

After a little while, Shiran, her gaze still fixed on the ground, said, "I'm sorry for troubling you."

Honestly, I figured she would curse me out. Even if I'd meant to save her, I'd made her do something she hated immensely. That was to say nothing of how desperate she'd been. No matter how emotional she got, it would be

understandable. No matter what she said to me, I was prepared to accept it. However, instead of expressing resentment, she apologized.

“With how starving I was, I could have troubled you even more. I might have even done something that couldn’t be undone. It seems I lost my composure. Please forgive me.”

Though she’d calmed down, Shiran didn’t turn her negative emotions against anyone. She seemed so helpless.

“Still, I never thought you’d notice,” she continued, sounding even more exhausted than me. “I thought I’d kept it a secret.”

“I’m not the one who noticed. Salvia told me,” I replied.

“Salvia?” Shiran slowly raised her face, finding this somewhat unexpected. “How could she...?”

“She’s the Misty Lodge, the monster who creates a world where dreams become reality. Naturally, the magic can surmise one’s dreams. Salvia is the magic of the Misty Lodge itself.”

“Then she found out during those few days we spent at the Misty Lodge?”

“Yeah.”

Salvia had already known what Shiran had been hiding back then. Thinking back on it, there’d been signs of it too.

“Having said that, she doesn’t read minds. At most, she can only read a strong wish,” I added.

“I see. So that’s how it is,” Shiran said with a self-deprecating smile. “Meaning she could see my abominable desire to drink your blood.”

“No, that’s not quite right,” I replied. “Drinking my blood was your urge, not your wish. It was actually the opposite. What she saw was your wish to *not* drink my blood.”

I hadn’t noticed this wish of hers. I hadn’t recognized that Shiran’s need to consume monster meat was a major problem. With help, hunting monsters wasn’t all that hard. But I’d misread what the problem was. I could’ve figured it out had I given it some thought. What would it be like to be stuck in a situation

where I'd have to hunt and greedily devour my prey? And what if humans could sate that hunger too? It would be hell. Shiran desperately fought to protect others, so it must've been unbearable agony for her.

"Sorry, Shiran. This all happened because I never noticed."

She was so resolute, so I'd thought she'd be fine. I'd been blinded by her radiance as a knight.

"No... There is nothing you need apologize for, Takahiro. After all, I thought I was fine too."

Shiran shook her head, looking powerless.

"After I turned into a monster, many things changed," she explained. "I no longer needed food or sleep. My skin lost all warmth. But even so, I believed myself to be a knight meant to protect the people. Plus, the commander kept me in her company despite the state of my body. So, no matter what happened to me, I thought my path remained unchanged."

Immediately following the attack on Fort Tilia, Shiran had worried that she would be a source of trouble. At the time, the commander had ordered her to remain a knight. When Shiran reported this to me, she'd been so happy. I clearly remembered her expression to this day.

She'd been anxious about turning into a completely different being—an undead monster—so the commander's words had definitely strengthened her mind. Her pride as a knight had supported her. That was why the Third Company's dissolution had been a serious blow.

"Up to that point, I believed I could simply stay my path as a knight forever more. But, when Margrave Maclaurin arrested the commander, the Third Company dissolved, and I was no longer a knight. They say bad things happen in droves... Ever since then, a starvation that could never be satiated by regular meals hounded me."

Shiran spoke with disinterest, but it only made her situation all the more tragic.

"At first, I didn't understand what was happening," she continued, "but I figured it out soon after. I was horrified. When I saw monsters, the thought that

I could eat them came to mind.”

Her single eye trembled slightly. She was likely remembering the shock she’d felt at the time.

“And that wasn’t all. That wasn’t the truly terrifying thing. It wasn’t just monsters... I...”

“That’s enough, Shiran.”

Seeing the heartbreaking fear deep in her eye, I tried to stop her, but Shiran refused.

“No. Please let me speak. I must confess everything. I ended up causing everyone trouble with my silence. It’s my sin, brought on by my own foolishness.”

Her obstinacy laid bare her desire to punish herself.

“I saw you with such eyes, Takahiro. The moment that impulse took over, especially when I could feel your body heat, I was hopeless. Even if it was to train you as a spiritualist, when I placed my hand upon yours, the warmth passing through to me was unbelievably pleasant.”

Shiran kept talking as if possessed by something.

“Maybe that was because I had no warmth of my own anymore, or maybe it was the wretched envy of the dead toward the living. Either way, I felt like I could drown in the pleasure...and it all connected to my desire for blood.”

The more she talked, the more erratic she became. Her instability unveiled everything she’d been hiding.

“And it wasn’t just you. I felt the same toward everyone. Everyone I saw. Everyone I talked to. There were no exceptions.”

Shiran’s body suddenly shook. Her hand, pressed against the ground, clawed through the earth.

“There was...even a time I saw Kei like a snack,” she confessed, squeezing the words out.

Unable to bear it any longer, her expression crumbled. Admitting that was

probably the hardest thing for her.

Our talk of the Misty Lodge's world reminded me of one thing: the conversation I'd had with Salvia on our last night there. In her world of mist, many impossible things happened to grant the wishes of those who wandered within.

"You, Mana, Ayame, and Kei hadn't changed at all."

That was what Salvia had said. In other words, everyone else had changed. Asarina had been able to talk. Mizushima had come out of hiding. Gerbera's lower body had become that of a human. But what about Shiran?

The scene I'd witnessed from the second-story window when Shiran and Kei were training had remained in my thoughts. Kei had hugged Shiran in high spirits, and Shiran had accepted her. Their intimacy had seemed like a normal everyday scene, but something about it had stuck with me since then.

Now I could understand. Shiran had needed to twist reality to be able to fulfill that scene. Kei was the type to keep near to those close to her, but during our journey, I'd never seen her and Shiran touch. Shiran had been the one carefully avoiding any contact. Those days in the Misty Lodge had been the only time she could touch anyone without being threatened by starvation.

If such a natural and tranquil dream was impossible, then reality must have been a nightmare for her.

"I found myself gulping when I saw her..." Shiran added.

Even now, her voice sounded damp.

"In that instant, something came to mind. Why must my life be prolonged if I must become like this? It would've been better if it all ended back then. Even though you saved me, even though I truly am grateful, I started to feel resentful."

Her words of repentance were a knife she used to inflict harm on herself now, but in truth, she'd been doing that and just hadn't let it show. She'd always blamed herself. This incident had only brought it out for us to see.

"I understand these thoughts make me seem ungrateful. I do not wish to

think that way. And yet... And yet, I...!"

For Shiran, it was a devastating confession. The reality of having to eat carrion was one thing, but even the feelings born of that need overwhelmed her mind. Nothing could be done about those feelings, though, and there was no reason to blame her for them. Even if her thoughts made her ungrateful, that was merely a facet of humanity's helplessness and weakness.

Nevertheless, Shiran would never allow that. Her fastidiousness and nobility tortured her mind, and despite the agonizing situation she was already in, she'd constantly been condemning herself. Today, that had finally come to light.

"I'm a fool... I'm not suited to being a knight..." she said with a fleeting smile.

All the straining threads that had held her up were cut, leaving her worn down to the bone. Being forced to reveal the secret she'd kept under wraps and to drink the blood she'd so desperately avoided was the final blow.

And I'd been the one to deal it. I'd broken the final remnant of her that was a knight, that final line she'd been trying to defend.

Shiran was a strong knight, but after she'd lost her knighthood, a natural weakness remained. She'd lost all her mental support, and life had struck her down. She was no longer the girl I knew. She seemed so very small.

That was the reason Salvia had said nothing despite knowing everything. She'd predicted how much it would hurt Shiran for her secret to be revealed. Salvia had also been concerned that it could lead to a bad outcome.

According to Salvia, the timing with which Shiran began feeling starvation was probably related to the commander's arrest. When Salvia told me about it, she'd touched upon the legend of the Undead King Carl. Back in Draconia, during our conversation with the carapace wyrm Malvina, we'd mentioned the subject in passing. Having lived so long, Salvia had been acquainted with the real Undead King Carl. He had apparently been pretty moody, so she hadn't been particularly close to him, but she still had a good understanding of what had happened to him.

According to the legends, he was the king of a nation that excelled in magic technology. The death of his lover, a savior, had driven him mad, transforming

him into a lich. Salvia had told me that the truth was a little different, though. According to her, Carl was already a lich by the time he met the savior. Much like Shiran, he'd hidden his circumstances to keep himself safe, so such details hadn't been passed down throughout the ages. Maybe some power had been at work to hide the scandal between a savior and a monster.

In any case, the Undead King hadn't turned into a lich because his lover's death had driven him mad. He was already a lich and had then gone mad when his lover died. After that, he'd been subjugated as a monster.

Salvia had compared that precedent to Shiran's situation and formed a hypothesis. In short, undead monsters could fall into a berserk ghoul-like state depending on their mental state. The great sorrow of his lover's death had triggered the Undead King's nature as a monster to run wild, ultimately leading to his subjugation. In Shiran's case, losing her pride as a knight through the Third Company's dissolution had tormented her with the hunger of an undead monster.

Their situations had some similarities. If Salvia's hypothesis was correct, then Shiran's current weakened state was extremely dangerous. Even though Shiran's mana had been replenished, she was extremely weak compared to the time she'd had my blood at Fort Tilia.

I had to do something about it...but what? There was only one method that came to mind, so I walked up to Shiran.

"Taka...hiro...?"

She raised her face...and I pulled her into my arms.

"Wha...?"

Her entire body stiffened with shock.

"Y-You mustn't." She immediately came back to her senses and struggled against me. "What are you thinking? It's dangerous! Takahiro!"

She was concerned for my well-being. Shiran had just hinted that she had a bloodthirsty desire for me, so getting closer to her, let alone holding her in my arms, was unthinkable. But it was necessary. I had to get this across to her using every fiber of my being, both through my words and my actions.

“Hey, Shiran, even if you’re not a knight, I want you to stay with us,” I declared wholeheartedly.

“Ah...”

“I’m a fool... I’m not suited to being a knight...”

That was what Shiran had said earlier. Perhaps those words had revealed everything about her current state. It was a case of lost identity. Being a knight was everything to her, so now that she no longer was one she’d lost the core of her being.

She’d only barely maintained herself despite this because she’d cloaked herself in the last remnants of her knighthood. Even without her core, that mantle of stability could keep her going.

But now she didn’t have that either. She was no longer a knight, so she couldn’t accept her own worth. Thoughts like, “Why must I go so far just to survive?” and, “If this was going to happen, it would’ve been better for it to end back there,” dominated her mind.

That was wrong, though. I couldn’t let Shiran think that way. My feelings were so strong they pushed me into action. What she needed now was for someone to accept her, to find worth in her, even if she was no longer a knight. That was what I believed, but I didn’t know if I was right. Still, her meager resistance came to an end.

“You mustn’t,” Shiran muttered. “I’ll cause you so much trouble.”

“So what?”

“I might be of no use whatsoever anymore.”

“Who cares?”

“I thirst for your blood, remember?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Isn’t my body repulsive now?”

“I don’t think so.”

I denied everything Shiran faulted herself with.

“You hear me, Shiran? None of that is a problem,” I said. Now that I knew everything, I could say it clearly. “Even if you find yourself repulsive, you’re still my precious companion. That doesn’t change.”

I validated her existence, conveying my thoughts, like, “You’re not repulsive,” through my arms. Before long, Shiran’s cold body began trembling and she started sobbing. And until that trembling stopped, I continued holding her in my arms.

Chapter 15: The Elves' Bond

Shiran's personal problem had finally been solved in the truest sense, but that didn't mean everything was over yet. Leah and Helena had seen her arm fall off, so we couldn't go back to them and just act like nothing had happened.

That said, I couldn't think of any good explanations that would deceive them. Regardless, even if I could think of one, we weren't swindlers. I didn't think we could actually trick them, and we had no reason to go out of our way to lose their trust. It was already too late to hide things.

I decided that we should be up front with them. However, in order to explain Shiran's situation as my servant, at least in name, I'd have to reveal some of my own circumstances. Based on our interactions to date, Leah and Helena were trustworthy, but whether they could accept someone like me was an entirely different question.

"I'm so sorry. Because of me, you have to..." Shiran said despondently.

"Don't worry about it. We had to go down this road eventually, anyway," I consoled her.

To be honest, I would've liked a little more time. I had a pretty favorable relationship with Leah and Helena now, but we weren't friendly enough that I could be sure of their reaction. Now that it had come to this, though, complaining wouldn't get me anywhere.

"But, Master, they might draw their swords against us," Lily said carefully, daring to tread on a disagreeable topic. "What'll we do if that happens?"

"I thought about that too," I replied, grateful for her consideration, "but I don't think it'll be a problem. The reclamation village's forces can't do much to us."

"Well, that's true."

It would be a severe mental blow, but no physical harm would come to us.

“If they reject us,” I added, “we won’t be able to stay in Shiran’s hometown. That’ll be unfortunate, but at that point, we’ll just have to start over from scratch.”

It would be best if it didn’t come to that, but we resolved ourselves for the worst and headed back to where the others were waiting.



The elves awaiting our return were all in various states. Leah was clearly emotionally unstable and liable to scream at any moment. This was apparently her being relatively calm too. I heard later that right after Shiran ran off, she’d lost her composure completely. Lobivia had had to hold her down by force while Katou had talked to her exhaustively to get her to calm down. I couldn’t thank the two of them enough.

Compared to Leah, Helena was far more composed. Her expression was stiff, and she stared at me fixedly. As for Kei, she ran straight to Shiran as her emotions ran rampant.

“Shiran! Shiraaan!”

Happy that her sister had returned, she cried, then got angry, then finally hugged her.

“Thank goodness, Shiran...”

“I’m sorry, Kei.”

Shiran, who’d been actively avoiding any physical contact with Kei, accepted her embrace. Perhaps she had regained some of her composure now that her hunger had been sated. I hoped physical contact like this would have a positive influence on her heart.

I couldn’t just stand around watching them forever, so I turned toward Leah and Helena. I had something to do.

“I’m sorry, Leah, Helena. May I speak to you for a moment?”

I prepared a spot where I could explain everything to them. Incidentally, Shiran wouldn’t be participating. She’d said she would join us, but I’d told her to get some rest instead. With everything that had happened, she was emotionally

exhausted. Besides, it would be hard on her to talk about it, and we couldn't guess how Leah and Helena were going to react. Considering that her mental state could have a negative effect on her undead body, she needed to rest instead. I'd discussed this with her on our way back to everyone, so she obediently adhered to my request.

I waited for Shiran and Kei to take shelter in the manamobile, then began explaining things to Leah and Helena. I told them about myself, about Lily and the other girls, and about Shiran. I'd already thought about what I would say in this situation, so I spoke fluently.

The two of them were shocked, naturally. Or maybe they couldn't believe what they were hearing. Common sense told them that no one could tame monsters. It also told them that undead monsters with a sense of reason only existed in a theatrical play they could see in Aker's capital; it was nothing more than a fairy tale loosely based on a king from the past.

They reacted as expected, but once I called Gerbera out of the manamobile, they had no choice but to believe me. Leah went weak in the knees and nearly fainted, but she still heard me out until the very end.

"And that's everything," I said once I finished.

"I understand," Leah said, groaning and holding her hand to her brow, "but please give me a moment..."

Her breathing was shallow. She was obviously distraught.

"Takahiro can tame monsters... Lily and the others are monsters he tamed... Shiran is now an undead monster... And the accident earlier was because of this? That can't possibly be..."

This was apparently too much for her to absorb at once. She was so pale that I could have mistaken her as being undead too. Her reaction was normal, of course. The commander was the exception for accepting things immediately. I decided to pause here. I didn't know whether the passage of time would have a positive or negative effect, but at this rate, Leah was likely to faint.

As I worried about Leah's well-being, someone broke the silence.

"Granny, were you lying when you said that you were happy Shiran came

back safely?" Helena asked, her voice steady and unyielding. "No matter what shape it took, Shiran came back to us, right?"

Helena didn't seem particularly perturbed by my story. At the very least, she looked like she'd accepted the situation and could voice her opinions composedly. Honestly, I didn't expect her to react like this.

"Um, a demi-whatsit, right?" she continued, ignoring my astonishment. "It's definitely a surprise, but that kind of thing doesn't really matter, does it?"

She wasn't just accepting the situation. I could sense the resolve behind her words.

"Helena..."

Leah was at a loss. It was as if someone had poured ice water over her head. Helena continued staring at her grandmother angrily, and after a few seconds, Leah smiled.

"Yes... You're...right. It...doesn't matter."

She spoke slowly, as if she were contemplating the meaning behind each word, and after a short while, she sighed deeply.

"It's just as you say, Helena. Even if her body is that of an undead monster now, Shiran is Shiran. Even if he commands monsters, Takahiro is Takahiro. Nothing has changed."

"So..." I prompted.

"Yes. It is like my husband said last night," Leah replied, nodding. "The debt we owe you for saving our village won't disappear, no matter what happens. You also saved Shiran. Akerian royalty, to whom we are greatly obliged, invited you to Aker to begin with. We said that we would accept you, no matter your circumstances. That was no lie."

Leah paused, then smiled bitterly.

"Having said that," she added, "I might not sound very convincing after I lost my composure like that just moments ago."

"It's fine. I understand your reaction," I replied.

“I’m grateful that you’d say so.”

Leah giggled, then gave me a serious look. She straightened her posture and continued.

“In the Woodlands, there is nothing more precious than a trustworthy ally. Failing to discern this can easily lead to a village’s destruction.”

There was a weight behind her words that befit one responsible for an entire village.

“We were informed beforehand that your circumstances were complicated and that they might be difficult for us to accept. Knowing that, we still decided to accept you. If my husband were here, I’m sure he would come to the same decision.”

She spoke without hesitation. The elves living in the Woodlands were homely, highly dutiful, and very compassionate. I was reminded of that once more today.

“Even now, I hope that we can maintain a friendly relationship, Takahiro,” Leah said with a deep bow.

Chapter 16: Shiran's Hometown

The following day, I got up early in the morning and trained with Gerbera. During our journey with the elves, Gerbera had snuck off in the middle of the night every now and then, but I still felt bad for keeping her cramped up in the manamobile all the time. However, now that Leah and Helena knew our secret, there was no need to avoid them. Gerbera looked tremendously pleased with this and enjoyed herself thoroughly.

As for me, I was getting accustomed to what I'd acquired during my mock battles with the elves in the reclamation village. Even if it was only little by little, it felt encouraging to be steadily mastering it.

Nonetheless, I still couldn't hold a candle to Gerbera. Even disregarding the possibility I might one day surpass her, would I ever be able to fight with her shoulder to shoulder? With that thought in mind, I desperately held out until our first training session in a good while came to an end.



After my training was done, Lily came over to wipe off my sweat and generally assist me when she suddenly noticed something.

"What's wrong, Master? You look deep in thought."

Gerbera, who looked utterly refreshed, without a single bead of sweat on her brow—unlike me—gave me a curious look as well.

"My Lord? Is something troubling you?" she asked, her slender brows knitting together anxiously. "Is something still on your mind? Regarding that Leah woman perhaps?"

"No. I'm not worried about that anymore," I answered with a shake of my head. "We talked it out more than enough already."

We'd discussed many things regarding our plans for the future yesterday. Now that Leah knew our secret, her husband, the village chief, should also be informed. For that reason, we would visit Rapha at a later date to explain

things. Furthermore, even if we kept the particulars from the other villagers, we planned to at least tell them that things were complicated and that their chief, Melvin, accepted us while knowing the full details. This was Leah's suggestion.

At present, despite the elves' solidarity, revealing my servants and all of the details was far too risky, especially considering how information could disperse. We didn't have to worry about that with Leah's proposal, and it would also prepare them for when we chose to reveal our secrets. On the off chance that an accident did occur and expose our identities to the villagers, just knowing that their chief had already accepted us would make a big difference in how they'd react.

"I'm grateful to have the opinion of someone who's in charge of a village. It was fortunate that Leah accepted us. Helena too."

I recalled yesterday's conversation between Leah and Helena after we'd reached an understanding.

"Your words really opened my eyes, Helena. To think I would lose myself so badly. Maybe I need to consider retiring."

"Don't be silly. Unlike you, I was already braced for the worst. That's all."

Helena had witnessed the incident the other evening at the storehouse, so she'd already known that something was going on with Shiran and had been readying herself for anything.

"If I'd heard about everything back then, I wouldn't be as calm as I am now. In that sense, I'm not all that different from you, granny."

"Is that so? Even if I were in your position, I don't think I'd be able to remain as calm as you are."

In hindsight, maybe it was a good thing that Helena had seen what she had the other night. Our present situation, in which a person of influence from the village had accepted us after hearing the truth, was perhaps the best possible outcome. Even when we encountered other elven reclamation villages, we not only had their princess's referral and Shiran and Kei as our travel companions, but also the support of a reclamation village's chief family. These facts were very likely to work in our favor.

I'd always acted in a way to gain their trust, but it seemed the elves' compassion for each other played a bigger role than I'd expected. I had to make sure this opportunity didn't go to waste.

Gerbera interrupted my thoughts with a hum and curiously asked, "If it's not about Leah, then what is it about?"

"Is it maybe about Shiran?" Lily asked curiously.

"Well, you could say that," I said, the slightest hint of bitterness in my voice. "You could also say I was thinking about myself. I didn't notice what Shiran was hiding. I wondered why that was and then realized the answer. I was probably doing the exact same thing Shiran had done before."

"What do you mean?" Lily asked.

"Remember? Back when we first met her, Shiran apologized for projecting an illusion of a savior on top of me, right?"

A finger to her lip, Lily thought it over for a bit, then nodded. "Oh yeah... Now that you mention it."

When Shiran had to battle monsters in the Woodlands, she'd had to face the many lives she'd been unable to save. Over the course of those losses, she'd started to wish for the advent of a great savior. As a result, when she met us, she'd overlaid this illusion of a legendary savior on top of us. As we got to know each other, however, she'd ended up realizing this.

"Please forgive me for projecting such a selfish illusion on you."

That was what Shiran had told me with a bow of her head.

"So what were you doing that's the same?" Lily asked.

"Projecting. I saw Shiran as an unwavering knight."

This projection had likely formed on the day of Fort Tilia's attack. When monsters overran the fortress, the Alliance Knights we bumped into had turned their swords on us. As a monster tamer, that had been the worst outcome I could possibly think of. At that rate, I would've had no choice but to run away without clearing the false charges against me.

In that moment, believing in my innocence, Shiran had convinced the

commander to stand down. I'd been overjoyed. Her knightly nobility had shone so bright in my eyes. She'd been so radiant that I'd projected an illusion over her.

In other words, Shiran had been my knight in shining armor, and I'd been the princess she rescued from a dilemma, causing me to greatly admire her. That was a somewhat backward comparison, though. To put it another way, that event was a precious memory to me, which was why it had become the cause of my failures now.

"I failed to realize," I said, sighing.

"But you realize it now, right?" Lily said, holding her hands out to the side. "In that case, you simply have to be careful moving forward."

"Lily..."

Her slender arms wrapped around me in a gentle embrace, consoling and encouraging me.

"Now that Shiran is no longer a knight, she's just another girl," Lily said. "You need to treat her like one. You mean to do that, right?"

"Yeah."

Turning into an undead monster and then living like a normal girl was strange, but it was a valid plan. After all, the thing that had first triggered Shiran's mental imbalance was losing her knightly status. If she could find a purpose in life, not as a knight, but as a girl, it could stabilize her emotions, which should improve her condition as a demilich.

"I'll help out too, of course," Lily said with a grin as she peeked up at me.

"Thanks. There are limits to what I can do as a guy and all. I'll leave that stuff to you."

"Roger that." Lily giggled, then gave me a slightly mean-spirited smile. "Well, I've already been *helping out*, in a sense."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"You'll find out soon."



I wondered what she was referring to. Whatever it was, she looked like she was having fun. That was something to be happy about, and her impish expression was very attractive, but it still bothered me that I had no idea what she was getting at.

Lily returned my dubious stare with a cheerful smile, then turned to the side. "Speak of the devil, huh."

"What are you talking about?" Shiran asked as she walked toward us.

"Nothing much. Just some private stuff," Lily said, fanning her hand and waving off the topic.

Shiran cocked her head, then turned to me with a gentle smile that spread across her features.

"Oh, Takahiro. I've brought everything you need to wash off."

Judging that it was about time for my training to end, Shiran had brought the stuff over for me. I was thankful, but I didn't voice my gratitude. My mind was stuck on something else entirely.

Gerbera seemed to be thinking the same thing, because after several seconds, she said, "Ooh. This is a surprise."

"Huh?" Shiran asked.

"Those clothes. They're Lily's...no, Miho's, right?"

She was wearing a blazer and a vivid pleated skirt. Yes, Shiran showed up wearing Mizushima's school uniform. I was so shocked that I was speechless, which, in my opinion, was a pretty reasonable response.

"Umm..." Shiran frowned and turned to Lily. "Did you not explain this to them already?"

"I thought it'd be nicer as a surprise," Lily replied.

"It looks like I'm the one who set it all up...even though I'm just as surprised."

"Mm-hm. It was a surprise both for you and my master. Two birds with one stone."

Lily threw Shiran a thumbs-up, looking satisfied.

“Hey, Lily...and Shiran? What’s all this about?” I asked, cutting into their conversation. Lily’s surprise was apparently a success, but I still had no idea what was going on. “Why are you wearing our uniform?”

“Umm, about that,” Shiran started, averting her eyes bashfully. “Just as you know, my usual clothing is that of a knight. But now that I am no longer a knight, I’m not suitable to wear such armor. So...”

“Given the opportunity, I suggested it was a good time to try out some more feminine clothing,” Lily added.

“I see. I get it now,” I said. This related back to what Lily had said earlier about treating Shiran more like a girl.

Now that I understood, I realized something.

“Hang on. Then why our school uniform?”

“It was the most feminine thing we had on hand,” Lily replied cheerfully.

“So she said when she pushed it on me,” Shiran supplemented somewhat bitterly.

In short, it came down to Lily’s tastes. That made sense.

“I did get Miho’s permission, of course. Actually, she was totally on board with it. She said Shiran is great material to work with and was enjoying herself immensely.”

Lily let out a satisfied sigh. Shiran, on the other hand, looked a little troubled, but not discontent. In fact, she looked more pleased than she was letting on.

“So? What do you think, Master? Suits her, doesn’t it?” Lily prodded.

“Huh...? Oh, right, umm...”

I took another look at Shiran. As a high school student, this uniform was deeply connected to my daily life in my own world. There were no foreigners among my classmates, so a blonde girl with a blue eye—and pointed ears and a large eyepatch covering half her face—felt out of place. Simply put, it felt like cosplay. However, my bewilderment was because of my memories of that world, nothing more.

“I think it suits you. It’s...a really fresh look.”

With her delicate and elegant elven features, Shiran had a calm beauty. Her trained body was taut with muscles, yet she had plenty of femininity. Her looks made pretty much any clothing seem stylish on her.

“Th-Thank you,” Shiran said, averting her eyes from me. “But, um...i-it’s embarrassing if you stare like that...”

Her fingers idly picked at the hem of the unfamiliar skirt, but that only drew the eye more. Shiran usually wore her knight’s armor, and even when she didn’t, she tended to favor a shirt and trousers so as not to hinder her movements. But now she had a skirt on. It wasn’t an outrageously short one, but the amount of exposure couldn’t be compared to her usual outfits. The pleated skirt swayed about over her round knees and captivating thighs.

“Oh, sorry.”

I immediately turned to the side...and met Gerbera’s eyes in the process.

“Hmm, a school uniform?” she muttered with a thoughtful expression. “Could I borrow it too? Or perhaps I can just make my own?”

“In that case, Katou might want one too,” Lily suggested.

“Hrm? What do you mean, Lily? Does Katou not have one of her own?”

“No, not for her. I’m talking about one for Rose. Katou must’ve seen Shiran wearing it, so she’s probably considering that this kinda thing can work for Rose too. Hey, Master? Don’t you wanna see everyone in school uniforms?”

“Don’t bring me into this...” I protested.

“Rather, um, Lily? Gerbera? Forgive me, but can you spare me this topic already?” Shiran said in an unusually flustered manner as she suddenly lowered her gaze to the things she’d brought with her. “O-Oh, right. Takahiro, I must hand these to you.”

She was obviously changing the topic, but this was pretty awkward for me too, so I hopped aboard.

“Oh, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

I accepted everything from her, then asked, “Oh yeah, how’s your body doing?”

“I’m fine,” Shiran answered with a wry smile. “That would be the third time I gave you that answer today.”

“He *is* a worrywart,” Lily added, smiling.

“No, um, I’m paying for keeping quiet until now, so I can’t really fault Takahiro for bringing it up all the time...”

Shiran was acting awkwardly, but unlike before, it didn’t look like she was pushing herself. Still, even as relief washed over me, I wondered whether asking her about her condition so frequently really did make me a worrywart.

“Ummm, Lily,” Shiran said after letting out a deliberate cough. “You’ll be preparing breakfast after this, correct?”

“Yup, that’s the plan.”

“I’d like to lend a hand this morning. May I?”

“Really?”

Lily’s eyes were as wide as saucers, but her astonishment only stood to reason. Shiran hadn’t helped much with preparing our meals during our journey. Lily was in charge of food, and those who wanted to help out generally did, so there were enough hands to go around. Shiran didn’t have any need to join in, seeing as she spent her spare time guiding me, and since she had no need to eat, nobody coerced her into helping.

“I’ll welcome any help...but are you okay?” Lily asked. “You can still rest some more, you know?”

“That won’t do,” Shiran said.

“How serious...”

Even if Shiran was no longer a knight, her temperament remained the same.

Lily remained upbeat, though her smile was a bit forced.

“Well, this is also part of living like a girl. Mm. Sounds good.”

“Thank you very much.”

“It’s a little weird to thank me for it...” Lily mumbled, then suddenly realized something. “Oh, one more thing.”

“What is it?” Shiran asked curiously.

Lily glanced at me and turned back to Shiran. “What about your meal?”

“My meal? I don’t need any...”

A beat later, she understood what Lily meant. Shiran looked my way, then quickly averted her gaze.

“Ummm... I just had some yesterday.”

“There’s no need to act so reserved,” I said, half as a warning. “Losing a lot of blood at once will give me anemia, so it’d actually be helpful if you took small doses more frequently. If you’d like, you can even have some now.”

“But...” Shiran was being indecisive. She shot a fleeting glance at Lily and Gerbera. “I’m...”

She mumbled incoherently and hung her head. Her brows knit, and her expression turned bashful while she idly fiddled with the hem of her skirt again. I’d never seen Shiran like this before. Her behavior was a bit bewildering.

“Umm... Shiran?” I asked.

“I-It’s nothing. I’ll pass after all,” Shiran said, shaking her head so hard that I thought I could hear it. “I’m not hungry, so...th-that’s how it is. Lily. I’ll get started ahead of you.”

With that, she turned on her heels and left in a hurry.

After Shiran had left, Gerbera cocked her head, confused. “What was that, I wonder?”

“Hmm. I guess I messed up a little,” Lily said with a bitter smile, being the only person here who knew what was going on.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Hm? I mean... Well, she’s embarrassed. About getting blood from you, that is.”

“It’s embarrassing to get blood from me...? Ooh.”

I suddenly understood. Drinking my blood meant she’d have to press her lips against my skin. She normally wouldn’t do that with someone she wasn’t intimate with, let alone someone of the opposite sex. And now that I was conscious of it, I felt awkward too. I could understand why she’d be reluctant.

“Well, I screwed up pretty bad, huh?” I said. “I felt cornered yesterday, so I didn’t really pay any attention to that.”

“Mhm. I was a bit careless too,” Lily said, scratching her cheek. “She needs it to maintain her own health, so if she were the same as usual, I don’t think it would’ve shaken her. Now, though... Maybe that was the original Shiran. In any case, she seems a little *too* shaken. Hmm. Maybe she’s always lived like a knight, so she doesn’t have much experience as a girl...”

Lily continued muttering, deep in thought, as I tried to make sense of the situation myself.

“In that case, it’ll be tough,” I said bitterly.

“Huh?”

“Drinking blood from me might be emotionally taxing on her?”

I was just asking to hear her opinion, but Lily’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“Nope. I don’t think so,” she answered.

“Hm? But just now...”

“She was probably conscious of me and Gerbera watching.”

“Oh, was that it?”

“Yup. I don’t think Shiran’s reluctant to drink your blood,” Lily declared with conviction.

“I see...”

I nodded along, but I didn’t really get it. I’d just told Lily that I would leave the stuff I couldn’t understand as a guy to her, so I decided to believe her.



After we finished breakfast, we started traveling again down the narrow road through the forest. We spent the entire day on the move, taking small breaks every now and then.

“The sun should be setting soon...” I remarked.

Given how long it would take to get things ready, it was about time to consider camping out for the night. However, we were apparently going to reach the village before the end of the day, so we pushed on.

Just as before, Leah and Helena were walking in front of the manamobile. My servants didn't need to hide from them anymore, so I was fine with Leah and Helena riding with us, but they'd only just found out yesterday. Even if our carriage was on the larger side, being in a narrow space with monsters like Gerbera and Ayame was too high a hurdle for them.

As for Shiran, she was sitting by my side in the driver's seat, and I was treating our interaction like a post-op checkup. For example, if she were to collapse or something, I could deal with it right away by being near her. Also, due to some kind of change after yesterday's events, I could now sense Shiran's mana through the mental path. In a sense, she'd ingested a portion of me, so perhaps that had had some kind of effect.

From what I could sense, Shiran didn't have much mana at all right now. Her body ran on mana, so she needed more of it, but giving it to her was rather meaningless at the moment.

As Shiran was now, it was like she had a small stomach. That was why she'd said she wasn't hungry this morning. Forcing water into a small stomach would just make it flow back out, and it risked rupturing the stomach. In other words, she had a low capacity for mana and couldn't consume it efficiently. Fortunately, she was at least stable, so all I could do was keep an eye on her.

“Oh, yeah, that was quite the surprise this morning,” I said to strike up a conversation. “Your cooking was delicious. I never knew.”

“It was just normal.”

Shiran was no longer wearing our school uniform. She'd said it would be problematic if she dirtied borrowed clothing while we traveled, but in truth, her

embarrassment from wearing unfamiliar feminine clothing played a bigger role.

“Besides, I didn’t do anything you can really call cooking,” she said.

“There’s no need to be humble. I don’t know much about cooking, but it was tasty for a simple soup. Lily was impressed too.”

“I just used some herbs. As I told Lily before, the flavor changes based on minute changes to the quantity, the mixture, and the timing with which the herbs are added.”

“That’s a matter of skill, though, right?”

“No. It’s simple familiarity. Lily will be able to do the same in no time.”

We continued our frivolous conversation while the carriage shook us about. It was somehow refreshing. Before this, our conversations had always revolved around swordsmanship and magic, or they were focused on the customs and organizations of this world. Lily said the two of us were overly serious, but we’d largely talked about things I needed to learn.

These conversations were interesting, and I enjoyed them in their own way, but I couldn’t deny that they’d all been about practicality. Maybe this was more evidence that I’d only ever seen her as a knight. Therefore, I figured I should spend more time with her like this.

“You’re pretty accustomed to it, huh?” I said.

“I learned from my late mother. Just so you know, even when I was a knight, I cooked for myself every now and then. When I did, the others in the company would show up out of nowhere and ask for a share, so it was quite the ordeal.”

“Hmm.”

“That was fine, but there were even some fools who said, ‘If I beat you in a mock battle, make my meals for the rest of my days.’ It became quite troublesome.”

“I’m pretty sure they meant something else by that...”

Even I could tell, but it hadn’t gotten across to the person in question. It seemed the ever-considerate Shiran was dense in some matters.

I chuckled, and Shiran turned a curious look my way.

“What is it?” she asked.

“No, nothing. It’s just...right. It’s a little unfortunate.”

“What is?”

“Today’s breakfast was great, so I thought I’d like some more of your cooking given the chance, but I’d rather not get beaten black and blue in a mock battle.”

Shiran giggled at my joke. “I won’t beat you black and blue, Takahiro.” I figured she would come back at me with a joke of her own, but I was wrong. “I’d like it if you had more of my cooking.”

She’d casually let her true intent slip. It was neither lip service nor a joke. It was simply her desire, and she spoke it so plainly, almost unconsciously. She was far too defenseless sometimes.

“Ah,” Shiran uttered, as if she’d just realized what had come out of her mouth. That was probably exactly the case, actually. She turned my way, confusion written on her features.

“Aah... Huh? What did I just...?”

Meaningless words spilled from her lips. Her bewildered and embarrassed behavior made her appear much younger than she was.

“Um, that just now, I mean...” She waved her hands in a panic, her eye swimming about looking for the right words to say. “I-I didn’t mean it like that, or...”

“Uhh, right. In either case, I...”

Crap, now I’m feeling weird about this too.

“I-If the opportunity arises,” Shiran mumbled, “I don’t mind. During your stay in our village... Umm, just as I said, if you’d like...”

“I-Is that so? Thanks...”

I nodded back to her. It felt like the temperature had shot up and my lungs were choking. Mysteriously enough, it wasn’t a bad sensation. Silence fell over us. That didn’t last for long, though. Unable to bear the strange atmosphere,

Shiran changed the topic.

“W-We should be arriving at the village soon.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I can more or less remember this path,” Shiran answered, taking a look around. “We’re coming up a slight incline, right? Once we get over it, we should be looking down on the village.” She calmed down as she spoke. “It’s been five years since I last came this way, but it remains unexpectedly fresh in my mind.”

To me, it looked like a never-ending forest, but it was different for Shiran. There was nostalgia in her voice. She’d once told me that she wasn’t likely to ever return to her hometown, much like her older brother. Having continued to fight with such tragic resolve in her heart, coming back here after five years must have been very emotional for her.

As we talked, the incline began leveling out. Leah and Helena slowed their pace ahead of us and walked back our way.

“Takahiro, we will be arriving in Kehdo shortly,” Leah said.

“I know. I just heard from Shiran.”

The road had leveled out completely by the time I answered her. I grew tense at the thought of arriving. Kehdo’s chief was Shiran’s uncle, and my current objective was to build a friendly enough rapport with him so that I could apply to live there.

I couldn’t relax yet. At the same time, I was looking forward to it. This was Shiran and Kei’s home, after all. I’d heard there was nothing here and knew it wasn’t all that different from the other reclamation villages I’d already seen, but I was still excited to see it.

The driver’s seat of the manamobile sat a little high, so Shiran and I were the first to see the village.

We were the first to see the flames billowing from the houses.

We were the first to see the villagers fleeing for their lives.

“What...the...?”

My voice cracked in my quivering throat. I stared at the scene in shock. I couldn't understand. My brain rejected the reality before my eyes, and I blanked out entirely.

That was careless of me. If monsters were attacking the village, I had to immediately take action, be it jumping to their aid or deciding it was too late and abandoning them. Perhaps that kind of readiness was a necessity for those who lived in this world, yet I remained frozen in place.

But what else could I do? I mean, this was no monster attack. Armored figures pointed their blades at the defenseless villagers. Each time they ruthlessly swung their swords, people tumbled to the ground so easily it was like some kind of bad joke. The fallen villagers didn't return to their feet either. The sight of so many people going down was akin to some poorly made diorama. It didn't seem real.

What the hell was going on? Who were those armed marauders? Why were the villagers under attack?

I immediately tried to grasp the situation. I could gather my thoughts again thanks to my experiences up until now, having struggled my way through multiple scenes of carnage, but I was still panicking at the unexpected situation. That was why I'd forgotten about another problem I had to deal with first.

"A-Aaah..."

Feeling someone stand up next to me, I snapped back to my senses. Salvia's warning rang in my head.

"As an undead monster, there's a risk that Shiran can go into a berserk ghoul-like state based on her mental stability."

In that case, this situation was...

"A-Aaaah..."

A chilling groan licked at my ear. I quickly turned to look and spotted a ghoul in front of me.

"Aaah... A-Aaaah..."

Right now, Shiran was more of a demighoul than a demilich. Her very being,

balanced between a highly intelligent lich and a senseless ghoul, was extremely unstable. The scales always swayed about unreliably, but now it was as if someone had slammed their fist on the ghoul side.

“Aaaaaaargh!”

The scales tipped over with an almost cruel violence. In that instant, Shiran let out a senseless shriek and flew off like a bullet.

At the end of their long journey, they arrive at a remote elven village. The curtains rise on the battle to protect what is dear to them. What unfolds is the story of a boy who isn't a savior, and a girl who is no longer a knight. This is the story of a savior and a knight's battle, a record of how they would become deeply tied together, of their struggles, their wishes, and their love.

Monster Tamer

9

Author

Minto Figure

Illustrator

Napo



“You
weren’t
really
wrong or
nothing,
Takahiro.”

MAJIMA TAKAHIRO
2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

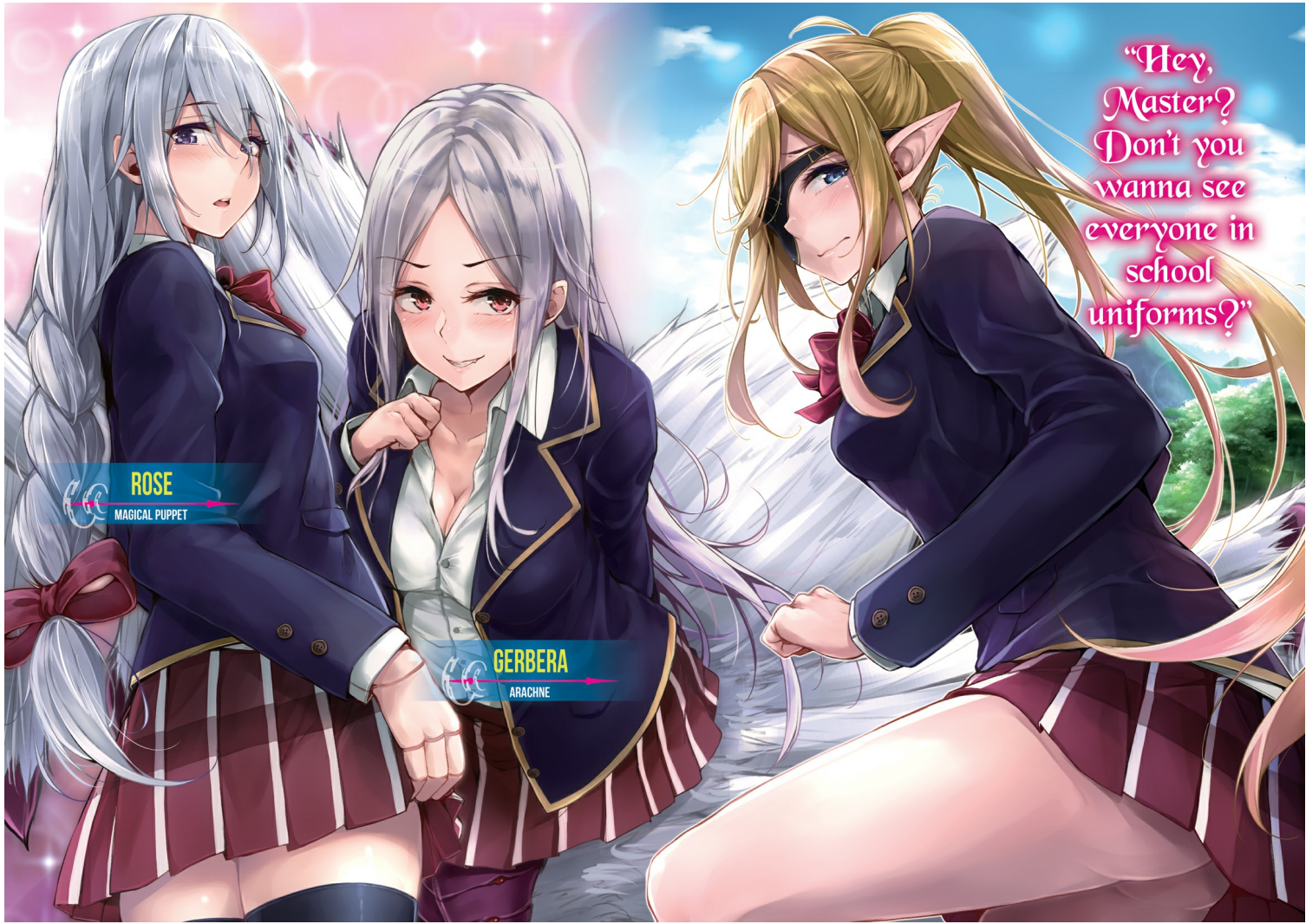
ASARINA
PARASITE CREEPER

LOBIVIA
DRAGON

AYAME
BLOWFOX







“Hey,
Master?
Don’t you
wanna see
everyone in
school
uniforms?”

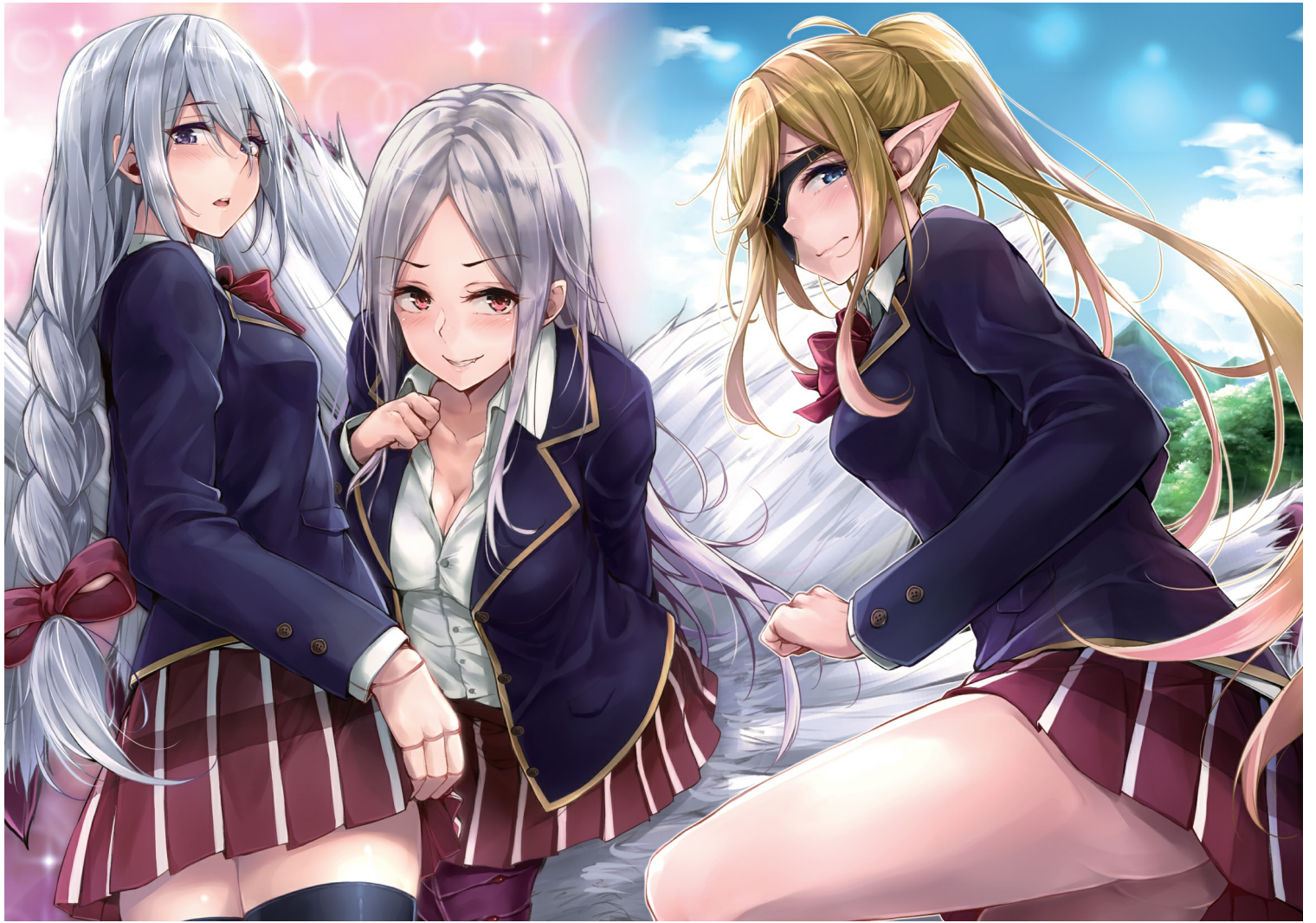
ROSE
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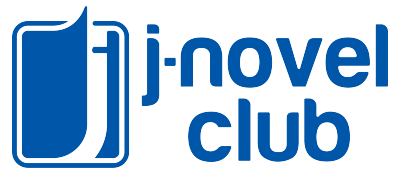
GERBERA
ARACHNE











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Monster Tamer: Volume 9

by Minto Higure

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